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On the Waterfront

**Few Friday Lent Perch Dinners Remain  
*A Huge Sacrifice?***

By David Frew  
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*Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. It was first used in April 2023.*



One of the traditions in our largely Roman Catholic neighborhood was the Friday night perch dinner. Neighborhood clubs, bars, and taverns offered perch specials on most Fridays, and particularly during the season of Lent.

Typically, the popular dish consisted of four deep-fried and battered perch fillets, buried in a plate of fried potatoes with a side salad or coleslaw. The popularity of the weekly fish plate was driven by the no meat on Friday church rule. Catholics were not supposed to eat meat on Fridays and even for those who were less than meticulous about following “the letter of the law” during the regular year, the Lenten season seemed different. Therefore, the number of perch specials increased since everyone suddenly became “faithful.”

And presto, a generally annoying church rule (the Catholic church was not the only one that encouraged no-meat Fridays. Lutherans, Methodists and Episcopalians did, as well) was driving an important neighborhood mini economy.

The Friday perch special was not limited to Erie. For decades the tradition continued as a Midwest staple in almost every city near the Great Lakes. Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, and upstate New York all shared the custom, largely because Lakes Michigan and Huron boasted productive perch fisheries. Sadly, however, Friday perch dinners have largely disappeared from many of those places as they have in Erie except for a select few. There have been several reasons for the slow extinction of the Friday perch dinners. Some “theological” and others biological.

In 1966 the Roman Catholic Church radically changed its ruling on meatless Fridays. Instead of banning the consumption of meat on all Fridays, the ruling changed to Lent only. Other churches, which had suggested or mandated meatless Fridays, followed suit or led the shift. Changes in church rulings compressed the Friday fish tradition into the Lenten season but, as this was happening, the economics of perch fishing began to change. Commercial fishermen were beginning to experience difficulties in catching perch and, as a result of the reduced commercial catch, prices began to escalate.

Another complication in the availability of perch was the general reaction to the extinction of the Lake Erie blue pike. As the 1970s progressed, it became apparent that the biomass of several fish species in the Great Lakes could be at risk. Eventually, government agencies that controlled commercial fishing both in the United States and Ontario began to introduce catch limits and quotas, further decreasing supply and increasing cost. Perhaps the mortal blow to the Friday perch dinner was the banning of gill nets and subsequent end of commercial fishing in Pennsylvania. Retail consumers, including markets and restaurants, were forced to turn to Ohio or Ontario suppliers, which drove prices even higher.



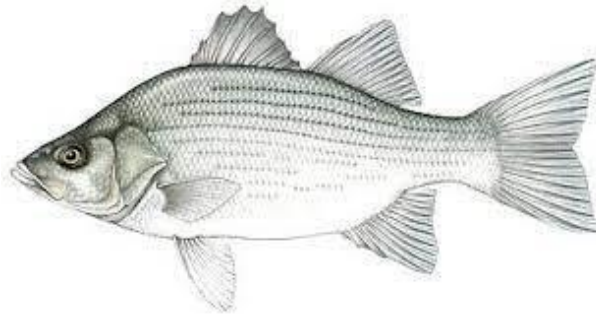
*The yellow perch*

By the late-1970s, the cost of yellow perch had risen so dramatically that restaurants began to substitute lower cost fish, including ocean species like cod and haddock. And that may have been the final blow for the Friday fish dinner special. Ocean species were poor substitutes for the tasty perch that generations of locals had grown to expect. There was and is a counterfeit substitute for the yellow perch dinner that had become a local staple. Seeing the difficulties and the costs associated with marketing the traditional yellow perch, Lake Erie fishermen began to rebrand two other species as “Lake Erie perch.”

The white bass, a larger and much more plentiful species, as well as the white perch were differentiated and elevated from the category of “rough fish,” which included carp, sheepshead and other less desirable species. Commercial fisheries began to rebrand these lower value fish as Lake Erie perch and still do so. Both of these faux-perch species are members of the bass family, and more oily and strong tasting than the beloved yellow perch, but they are more available, easier to catch and in the case of “white bass” much larger than yellow perch, making them a seemingly desirable substitute.



*The white perch*



*The white bass*

The table below illustrates annual Lake Erie commercial catch totals for species of interest with respect to this essay: yellow perch, walleye (yellow pike), white perch, and white bass. Data within the table suggest population trends. Commercial rather than sports fishing totals are provided herein since harvest technologies have not changed significantly on either side of Lake Erie. These commercial totals should provide a statistical proxy for actual population shifts (as opposed to likely population totals). Yellow perch have shown a steady decline from 2016 through 2020 and a small rebound for 2021. Compared to 1970 data, it could be concluded that yellow perch have been in decline, historically. The slight increase from 2020 to 2021 suggests that the overall current population is probably stable, even though the recent experience of sport fishermen would suggest otherwise.

The apparent decline of the perch population reported by anglers may be explained by shifting diet habits of the yellow perch rather than a population decline. As the lake has warmed over the past six years and there has been a notable absence of ice cover, it would seem from Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) sampling studies of gill netted perch that the diet of yellow perch has shifted markedly. In six years, the stomach content of the average perch (tested) has changed from about 80% fish (mostly emerald shiners) to less than 20%. As the fish content of yellow perch stomachs has decreased it has been replaced by invertebrates: insects, freshwater shrimp, etc. This suggests that it has become easier for perch to find and consume food other than emerald shiners, the traditional staple meal for yellow perch. Part of the shift in yellow perch eating habits is clearly linked to the reduction of the population of emerald shiners in Lake Erie.



*Lake Erie is home to native shrimp like the one pictured here and several invasive species.*

This feeding change has altered the feeding habits of yellow perch in an important way, with respect to the problem of catching them (by anglers). Instead of schooling at the same depth as the bait fish that they are eating, yellow perch are currently distributing themselves along the water column at various depths, where they are hunting for insects and other invertebrates.

The data reveal an opposite trend for Lake Erie walleye. That population seems to be increasing significantly. From 2016 to 2021, the total walleye harvest increased from just under five million pounds per year to over 11 million, more than doubling. This may or may not suggest that the current population in the lake has doubled, but it clearly signals a dramatic increase in the walleye population.

This statistic may be related to the reduction in yellow perch. Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) studies of the stomach contents of walleye reveal a significant increase in the number of perch being consumed by yellow pike during the last few years. The walleye is a literal eating machine with a huge mouth that is capable of ingesting relatively large fish, including legal catch-sized perch. This large predator fish is obviously consuming large numbers of yellow perch. This finding correlates with reports from sports fishermen who regularly catch their limit of walleye in Lake Erie (six fish) and do so in much shorter times than in past years. The ready availability of walleye has spawned a new cottage industry on both sides of Lake Erie: charter boat fishing for walleye.

**Six-Year Lake Erie Commercial Catch Totals:  
Yellow Perch, Walleye, White Perch and White Bass**

<b>YEAR</b>	<b><i>Yellow Perch</i></b>	<b><i>Walleye</i></b>	<b><i>White Perch</i></b>	<b><i>White Bass</i></b>
<b>1970</b>	10,545,000	274,000	-----	2,475,000
<b>2016</b>	4,338,000	4,829,000	2,341,000	4,116,541
<b>2017</b>	4,822,000	5,686,000	3,696,000	2,541,000
<b>2018</b>	4,497,000	6,983,000	3,529,000	2,011,000
<b>2019</b>	3,156,000	7,629,000	2,932,000	1,585,000
<b>2020</b>	2,064,000	8,652,000	1,602,000	1,421,000
<b>2021</b>	2,117,000	11,150,000	3,186,000	11,186,000

*\*The Year 1970 has been added to provide historical context*

As the dynamics of yellow perch fishing have shifted, commercial fishermen have rededicated their attention to catching white perch and white bass, which are often mistaken for each other. These species are often mixed and sold as Lake Erie perch (not Lake Erie yellow perch). At the wholesale level they are filleted in much the same way as yellow perch, frozen, packaged and labeled Lake Erie perch. The data in the table above shows that the catch of the two species has increased markedly with 2021 catch totals of white bass exceeding 11 million pounds. According to the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, the one-year increase between 2020 and 2021 was driven by Canadian commercial fishermen who began aggressively gill netting for the species to make up for lost revenue, following several poor yearly harvests of rainbow smelt.

The commercial popularity of white perch and white bass can be explained by their relatively low price. Prices per pound at the dock in 2021 were \$3.90 for yellow perch, \$1.90 for walleye, \$.80 for white perch and \$.20 for white bass. The dockside prices are for whole (pre-cleaned) fish. The retail price of final-cleaned (filleted) products would be many times that cost. A survey of local markets suggests that prices of filleted yellow perch are in excess of \$20 per pound if the product is available, which it is often not. Retail prices for walleye fillets (when they are available) are significantly lower, usually in the range of \$10 per pound, which makes sense in light of the difference between dockside prices (\$3.90 for yellow perch versus \$1.90 for walleye).

The relative scarcity of yellow perch has been exacerbated by the fact that commercial fishing has almost ended on the United States side of Lake Erie. Thus, the only significant provider of yellow perch at this time is the Ontario commercial fishing industry and their reduced output of Lake Erie yellow perch barely fulfills the demand on the Canadian side of the lake. There is a new entry in the yellow perch market, however, farm-raised fish from Ohio. Cheaper than the wild caught product but not as tasty.

Given the very high prices of yellow perch and limited commercial availability it should come as no surprise that the long-time favorite Friday night special is no longer easily affordable. To purchase, cook and sell a yellow perch sandwich these days would cost much more than the market could bear. Those who are eating

what seems to be a Lake Erie perch sandwich or fillet special are almost certainly consuming alternative species (white perch or white bass). These fish are currently marketed by wholesale suppliers as “Lake Erie Perch,” but the shipping boxes do not say “Lake Erie Yellow Perch.”

As a local supplier once said regarding this sad substitution, “once you spread a thick coat of batter on a fish and deep fry it, few people would recognize the difference.” But those who consume this modern “perch” are not experiencing the taste delights that were so common during Lenten seasons of the 1950s. And in retrospect, was it really a sacrifice?”

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*Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources officials who currently monitor commercial fishing on both sides of the lake and have provided the information summarized above have little or no advice for sports fisherman who are wondering how to catch yellow perch. Their job is to estimate the biomass of various species and manage a quota system for commercial fishermen as well as creel limits for anglers.*

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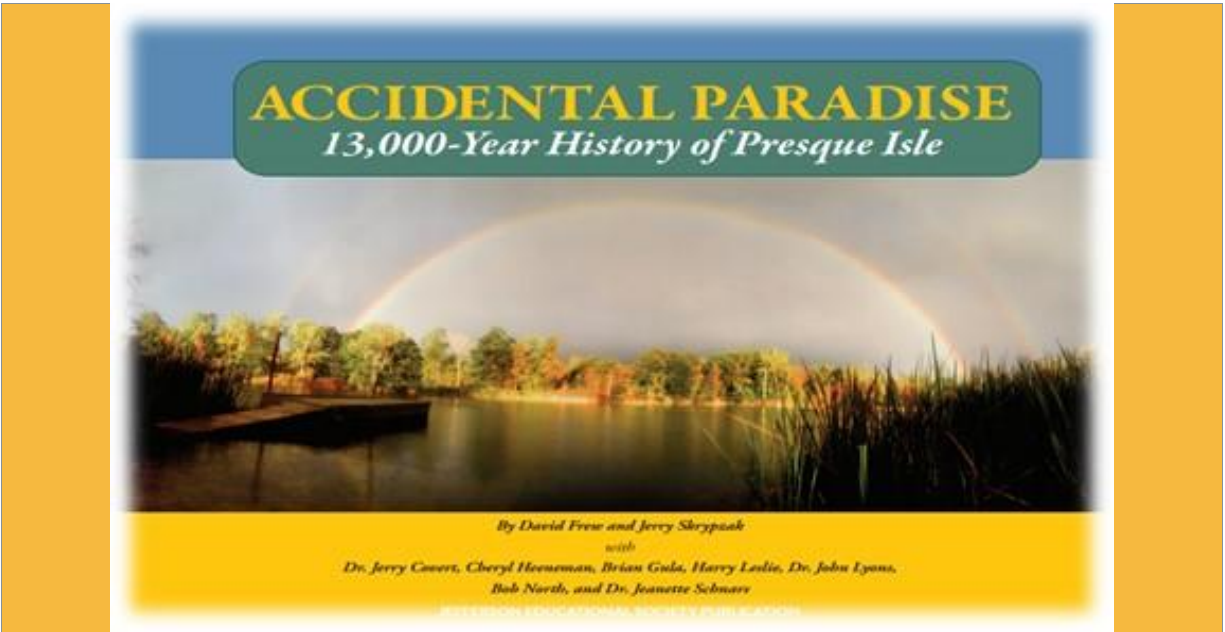
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***Accidental Paradise***  
*by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak*





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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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