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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Amazing Armenian Neighbor: Dead Fish, Chicken Feathers, and Bunny Poop

By David Frew
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Editor's note: Following is an On the Waterfront Classic by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence David Frew. The Jefferson first published it in July 2021.

Armenian folk dancers

While West Fourth Street was resoundingly Portuguese and Italian in the 1950s, other ethnic types were mixed into the neighborhood. There was a small German enclave at the corner that seemed to surround Beckman's Store, a few Irish families and, most unique of all, a single Armenian, Peter Kalagian. Mr. Kalagian was our next-door neighbor to the east, a widowed elderly man. He was retired and did not have a car or drive. If he needed to go anyplace, he walked, and if there was something to be picked up, he took an ancient steel wheelbarrow. Even to the grocery store. Quiet but friendly, he smiled at the kids and waved but never initiated a conversation.

Homes on West Fourth Street were situated irregularly on deep lots, having been built in the late 1800s prior to modern zoning laws that mandated front walls that lined up regularly. Almost everyone, including my parents, developed a large back lawn planted with grass as well as an assortment of trees, including fruit trees, such as apple, peach, and plum. Fences were rare. Most everyone divided their properties with a narrow strip of flowers and bushes, sometimes using border spaces to grow small summer gardens of vegetables or tomatoes.

Mr. Kalagian's yard was entirely different. He did not waste a single square inch on such trivia as bushes and flowers. Instead, he had a steel fence on both sides of his property so that he could convert all of the available space into a garden. There was no grass, just an immense and precisely organized vegetable garden. Along the back boundary in Mr. Kalagian's yard was a narrow, broken down, tar paper-covered building, which served as a garden shack and barn. In it he stored all of his garden supplies and tools, and he raised rabbits and chickens. As a youngster, I regularly awoke to the sounds of a rooster and hens that gave the neighborhood the feel of farmland.

There was one narrow path running lengthwise down the center of the yard from the back door of the house to the garden barn. This was the working path that Mr. Kalagian used to access the garden beds that he planted. He had erected narrow steel poles similar to the clothes poles that other neighbors used for stringing clothes lines in their yards (there were no laundry dryers). In Mr. Kalagian's yard, however, they supported a wire that ran along the top of the garden access path. The wire was about six feet off the ground and used for supporting heavy strings that stretched to the right and left and were staked into the ground. The wire-string structure was used for supporting vegetables, like beans, that needed to grow up and off the ground. Neighbors observed that between the eggs, the vegetables that he grew, and the chicken and rabbits that he slaughtered, Mr. Kalagian rarely had to go to a store for food.

Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian

Mr. Kalagian spoke with a thick but clearly understandable accent and rumors were that he had come to the United States at about the time of World War I from somewhere in the Middle East. He had worked at General Electric and was long retired. Neither I, nor my friends or family knew anything about the Middle East or Armenia, where I later learned that he had been born. His roots were mysterious. My first understanding of Armenia and its tragic ethnic cleansing came from Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian years after our neighbor had passed away. Parseghian, who was born in 1923, was a generation younger than Mr. Kalagian. He played for the Cleveland Browns and then rose through the ranks of college coaches, becoming head coach at Northwestern. In 1964, he moved to Notre Dame, making the questionable shift in mid-career because he was attracted to Catholic higher education. At the time, he was leaving a highly successful football program to take over one that had seen better days. It was Parseghian who called national attention to the terrible ethnic cleansing of the Armenian people, using his national platform after Notre Dame won a national football championship in 1966. The coach also helped everyone in the neighborhood to understand the proper pronunciation of Mr. Kalagian's last name, which almost everyone misunderstood. People regularly called him Mr. "Co-Lay-Gin," and he never corrected them. Until he passed away and his obituary was in the paper, I had never seen his name in print.

Mount Ararat, as seen from today's Armenia

Contemporary Armenia is a fraction of its historic self, by land mass, having been divided several times by conquerors. Even its most sacred geographic artifact, Mount Arafat, the sacred mountain, has been subsumed by geographic neighbor, Turkey, and is no longer within the country boundaries. Mount Arafat is the place where Noah's Ark was said to have come to rest after the great flood, and the location where modern anthropologists claim to have found the remains of the ancient vessel.

Armenia was an incredibly important Old Testament biblical location and became a Christian country, which may have been a primary source of consternation from neighboring Middle Eastern and Eastern European countries. Over several centuries, it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Iran, and Russia. Each conquering country took portions of the land and left indelible marks on the culture. It seems that the ethnic cleansing of Armenians was motivated by its Christian heritage. Armenia and its people were seen as infidels to some surrounding Muslim countries.

Regardless of the underlying reasons, approximately 2 million Armenians were murdered or displaced just before and during World War I. Its people were sent on death marches into Syria and slaughtered mercilessly, even though Armenians had been loyal to many of their persecutors. Thousands served in the Turkish Army until they were singled out and executed. Approximately 1.5 million Armenians were killed during the period. Hundreds of thousands more either fled or were deported to other countries with the United States forming the second-largest diaspora after Russia. It is estimated that almost 500,000 Americans claim Armenian heritage. Historians now note that the Armenian ethnic cleansing was the world's most devastating human atrocity at the time but that it was driven into obscurity decades later when Nazi Germany killed as many as 11 million Jews.

American-Armenian diaspora member, actress and singer Cherelyn "Cher" Sarkisian, was one of many whose families settled in the Los Angeles area.

Immigration records suggest that there were two Armenian destinations in America: Los Angeles and "the general Northeast." Northeastern destinations included New York, Boston, Detroit, and Philadelphia. Peter Kalagian was a member of the Armenian-American diaspora and since he was born in 1886, he must have left his homeland for the United States during the terrible World War I era, arrived here via Detroit and settled on West Fourth Street. When I first knew him, my attention was drawn to the way that he cared for his garden. He was a hard and disciplined worker, meticulously preparing plantings every year.

Each spring, before the snow had melted, Mr. Kalagian began an absolutely amazing ritual. His first step was to turn over the hardened soil by hand with a spade, which he carefully sharpened by hand with a file as he was using it. Modern gardeners would use a rototiller, but he did it all by hand, noting when I watched him that he needed to complete the operation while the snow was several inches deep to take advantage of the moisture that was being mixed into the soil. I would ask simplistic questions of him, and he always answered carefully. Next, and while the soil was still "roughed up" and wet, he would make several trips from his home to the Cascade Docks, a mile away, pushing an ancient wheelbarrow. He trekked to the docks each year at the time when dead and decaying mooneyes were stacked on the edges of the shore and sending a terribly noxious odor wafting over the neighborhood. Returning with full wheelbarrow loads of dead and smelly fish, he carefully spread them on top of the turned-over garden soil. Then he used the sharpened shovel to chop the fish into smaller pieces and turn them into the soil. The fish spreading and chopping operation took several days and made the immediate neighborhood smell like the docks, much to the chagrin of many neighbors.

The next step was even more amazing. After smoothing out the soil a little bit, Mr. Kalagian began a series of wheelbarrow trips to a chicken and egg business that

was located in the alleyway between and parallel to West Fifth and West Sixth streets, and from Poplar to Cherry streets (the alley is still there but the chicken business is long gone). Apparently, the owners of the business had an arrangement with Mr. Kalagian that allowed him to "muck out" the chicken coops, removing massive volumes of saturated straw and chicken manure. He dutifully pushed countless, loaded wheelbarrows containing this odiferous mixture from the egg business to his yard, where he spread the compound over the fish-rich (nitrogen enriched) soil. Those who had been bothered by the odor of fish were about to learn the definition of a really terrible smell.

In addition to the frightful odor of the chicken muck, the process of spreading 10 or 12 loads over the garden resulted in a skim coating of tiny feathers that had been imbedded in the wet mixture as it was spread on top of the dirt. Then as the warming sun heated the chicken muck-wet straw treatment, feathers would dry and blow away with the wind. This meticulous garden preparation step had the effect of sending airborne chicken feathers all over the neighborhood.

There was one final fertilizing step. As the chicken feathers and dead fish were becoming one with the soil and Mr. Kalagian was using a rake to even the dirt into the look of a traditional garden patch, he added an additional natural fertilizer by choosing this time in early spring to clean his rabbit hutch. The neighborhood kids often watched in horror as Mr. Kalagian walked to his garden hutch to fetch one of his live bunnies. Holding the unfortunate rabbit by the scruff of the neck, he would return to the house, where we knew what was going to happen next.

Mr. Kalagian's primary source of meat came from rabbits that he had been raising in his garden shed-hutch and the occasional chicken. We were always distressed to see the parade of squirming bunnies being taken from the hutch to be slaughtered and eaten. In the spring, when the rabbits no longer needed the hundreds of pounds of imbedded straw and bunny poop that kept them warm during the cold winter months, Mr. Kalagian would dig out the rabbit nesting material and spread it over the garden. The wet straw and rabbit manure mixture became the final ingredient prior to spring planting.

After planting a combination of seeds and small cuttings that he had raised under lights in his basement, Mr. Kalagian, who was not a person who ever wasted time, had another ritual spring activity. One by one, he carried rolled-up area carpets out of the house and into the garden. Once he had them in the yard, he lifted them up and over the wire that ran along the garden path and left them hanging for days. With a carpet hanging in place, he would use a long-handled brush to beat it, freeing dust that had accumulated over the winter. It was his way of spring cleaning, and I was always amazed by the number of rugs that he dragged out each year. Watching him struggle one day, I offered to help lift an extremely heavy rug up and over the wire where he was positioning it. Mr. Kalagian, who was a short

man, appreciated my assistance. After the rug had been lifted into position, he dug into his pants pocket and handed me a quarter.

Not at all amazingly, when the rug beating step was nearing completion, the garden was turning green with new plants. Modern gardeners use various (sometimes toxic) chemicals to achieve the goal of developing a rich soil base for growing vegetables and then an assortment of nasty chemicals for keeping their gardens weed-free. But not Mr. Kalagian. His seemingly smelly recipe of dead fish, chicken manure, wet straw, and rabbit poop was probably the very best way to create a productive garden. It was organic growing, long before it became trendy. After planting, which did not happen until late May, Mr. Kalagian was in the garden every day, tiptoeing around the beds with a large cloth bag where he placed offensive weeds that were trying to invade his neatly divided beds. By July, the garden was a wonder of oversized vegetables. Melons, squash, carrots, lettuce, onions, beans and every other imaginable garden product was thriving, often growing vigorously into the early winter. Roundup? Unimaginable.

Sam Kalagian's 1940 Strong Vincent High School graduation photo

Sam Kalagian's war records and medals

Mr. Kalagian's wife Margaret had passed away, and their four children (Leo, Mary, Sam, and Seth) were gone by the time I was growing up. One son, Sam Kalagian, graduated from Strong Vincent in 1940, joined the Army during World War II, and rose to the rank of colonel. Samuel Kalagian was a decorated and celebrated pilot who served in three wars, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, over an amazing a 33-year career. Known to his colleagues as "Black Sam," Col. Kalagian had a storied career that included becoming a military tactics expert as well as a highly demanded speaker.

Col. Kalagian would regularly write long letters to his father and Mr. Kalagian, who could not read, would store the letters. Then several times each summer when our family was in the yard, he would motion to my mother. After meeting her at the fence between yards, he would ask her to read the letters outloud. As my mother would slowly read the letters, Mr. Kalagian would weep uncontrollably. Then, after the readings, he would present her with amazing bundles of beautiful vegetables –– tomatoes the size of melons, crisp lettuce, and much more.

Colonel Sam Kalagian, looking quite like his dad but with trendy clothing, is photographed just before he passed away in 2002.

Peter Kalagian passed away in 1965 after I left home. His son, Sam, died in 2002 and daughter, Mary, who lived in Erie all her life, passed away in 2011. After he died, my mother reported that children and grandchildren emptied the house and that, remarkably, there were dozens of beautiful "Persian carpets" that had been stacked on top of each other so that there were several in each room of the house.

Mary Kalagian Walczak

Several years ago, Michael Pollen, author of "The Omnivore's Dilemma," visited Allegheny College to discuss his new book. Fascinated by Pollen's statistical approaches to the American food delivery system and its nutritional perils, I drove there to listen. As I sat fascinated by Pollen's incredibly creative ways of thinking about food and nutrition, I was transported back in time to West Fourth Street and Mr. Kalagian. Driving home after the lecture, I realized that Mr. Kalagian was a genius who was way ahead of his time. I wished that I could travel back in time to ask questions.

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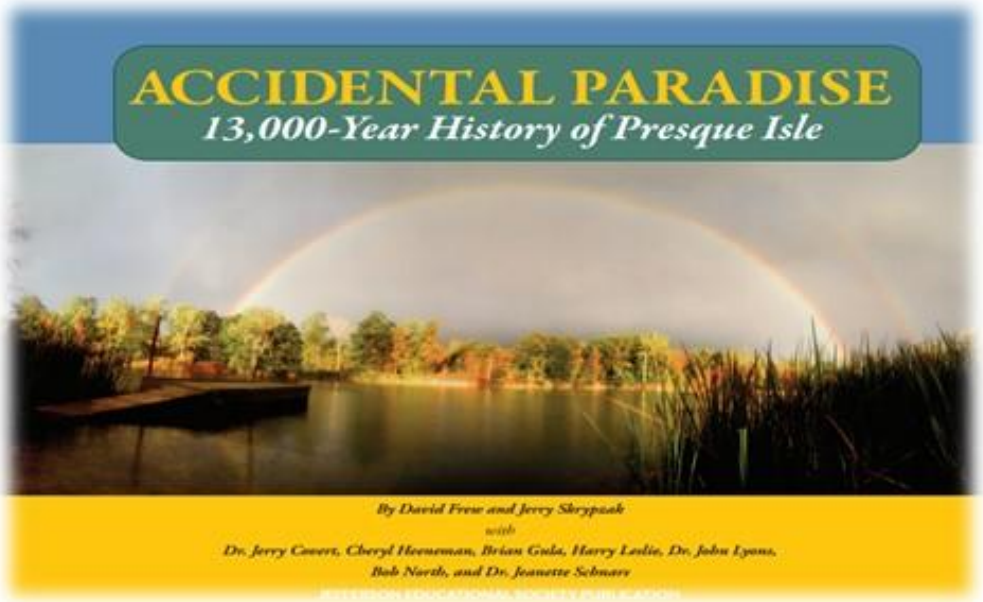


The beautiful book on Presque Isle published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – "**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**" – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center's gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

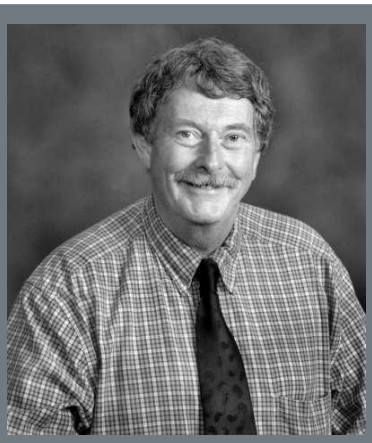
The book, priced at **$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

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 ***daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.***

For more information, send an email to **aperino@TRECF.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.

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