

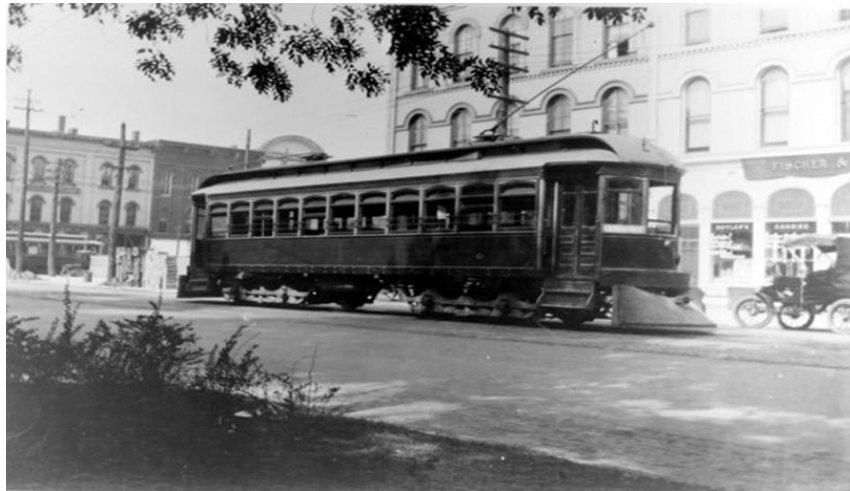
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Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

West Fourth Street Trolley: Gateway to the World

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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The West Fourth Street Trolley was once Erie's most popular streetcar.

Growing up on West Fourth Street, 10 blocks from downtown, was beyond exciting. For reasons that seemed obscure to us kids, our street had once been a major thoroughfare. Until the early 1930s, its importance was punctuated by the

fact that a trolley with its ancillary infrastructure (electric lines and more) once graced the neighborhood. Old-timers recalled the shiny metal trolley track that ran down the center of the road as well as the concrete “stopper” that punctuated the end of the line at West Fourth and Cascade streets. That safety device was installed during the 1920s after a few trolley drivers had somehow managed to drive the streetcar off the end of the tracks. When that happened, a team of horses had to lift and drag the trolley back onto the tracks.

The streetcar was important during the era before automobiles. It carried crowds of people back and forth from downtown to dozens of important destinations along one of Erie’s most important streets. During the pre-World War II era, the relatively short 10-block span contained four hotels, more than 20 grocery stores, a theater, department store, four restaurants, three social clubs, a machine shop, and a ship’s engineering supply-chandlery. All of this commercial activity had logically been located on the street positioned about halfway between the bayfront and oppulent West Sixth Steet. Wealthy folks on West Sixth Street (especially on the east end of the thoroughfare) would not have tolerated the kind of commercial activity that had slowly positioned itself two blocks to the north.

The end of the line at Cascade Street was exciting. After the trolley had reached the corner of Fourth and Cascade, it came to a stop, after which the conductor reversed the car’s direction. He moved the sign and left his driving station at the west end of the streetcar and walked to the opposite (east) end. Here he repositioned himself for the trip back downtown. The Cascade Steet end of the line was also the most important stop, primarily because of the Cascade Docks. From the late 1800s, when the docks first appeared, until the 1950s, there were lots of jobs at the docks. Consequently, the first few streetcars of weekday mornings unloaded hundreds of men who headed north to the water for work. Later, several of the trolley’s riding men turned the opposite way and walked south toward the shops on West 12th Street.

Joe Bello, who ran Bayview Tavern at the corner of Fourth and Cascade once commented that shortly after the arriving trolley bell rang each morning, dozens of men filed into his establishment to enjoy the breakfast special: two eggs, toast, and a beer. Morning breakfast was an important part of Mr. Bello’s business (today’s Bello’s Market in the Colony Plaza is operated by Joe Bello’s family). For “gastronomically refined” readers who are grossed out by the idea of a breakfast special that includes beer, it should be noted that a contemporary tavern on West Eighth Street offers the same breakfast special for early morning clients.



This vintage photograph from the 1950s shows the docks as well as Cascade Street, descending to the bayfront.

As Erie grew, Cascade Street also developed into a major north-south thoroughfare. Prior to the late 1950s, when access to the waterfront was shifted to Cranberry Street, Cascade was the only way to access the docks. North of Fourth Street was a large market, Bellos, on the corner of West Third Street. To the south were markets at West Fifth and West Seventh, a barbershop at West Fifth, a Lutheran church at West Seventh, and several businesses on West Eighth.

By the mid-1930s, the Erie Transportation Company had replaced the last of its streetcars with motorized buses. Even then, the West Fourth Street route continued as one of the city's most important. The West Fourth Street bus operated every 20 minutes for decades. The route was eventually extended to the west, and the name was changed to the West Fourth/West Sixth route. At the old end of the line, buses turned south and continued on Cascade Street to West Sixth Street.

After streetcars disappeared, the city inelegantly removed most of the old trolley tracks, but traces of the old infrastructure, as well as bits and pieces of metal material imbedded in the road, remained as a part of the black-topped street for decades. Resulting irregularities became a serious groundskeeping issue during the regular football games played in the street, especially night games played under the lights (streetlights). The severe crowning of the street caused many

pass-route running accidents and more than a few bruises, bumps, and ripped pant knees.



A 1940s-era city bus

Markers of the old days of Erie transportation continued well into the 1950s. There were a number of steel horse-hitching posts at West Fourth and Cascade and at West Fifth and Cascade, near big stores. In addition, there were several horse barns in the neighborhood. One of these still stands behind the old Beckman ship engineering and grocery complex on the southeast corner of West Fourth and Cascade streets. Beckman's grocery store fronted on West Fourth Street and the adjoining ships' engineering and provisioning operation fronted on Cascade Street. Mr. Beckman used a horse and wagon for such duties as provisioning ships at the Cascade Docks. He kept his horse and wagon in the barn that still stands on Cascade Street, adjacent to his stores. In modern times, the barn was converted to a large muticar garage.

These days it is difficult to imagine the commercial importance of West Fourth Street. Most of the old businesses have disappeared, replaced by empty spaces, strange modern-looking houses, or boarded-up buildings like the venerable old Starlight Hotel at the corner of West Fourth and Plum streets.



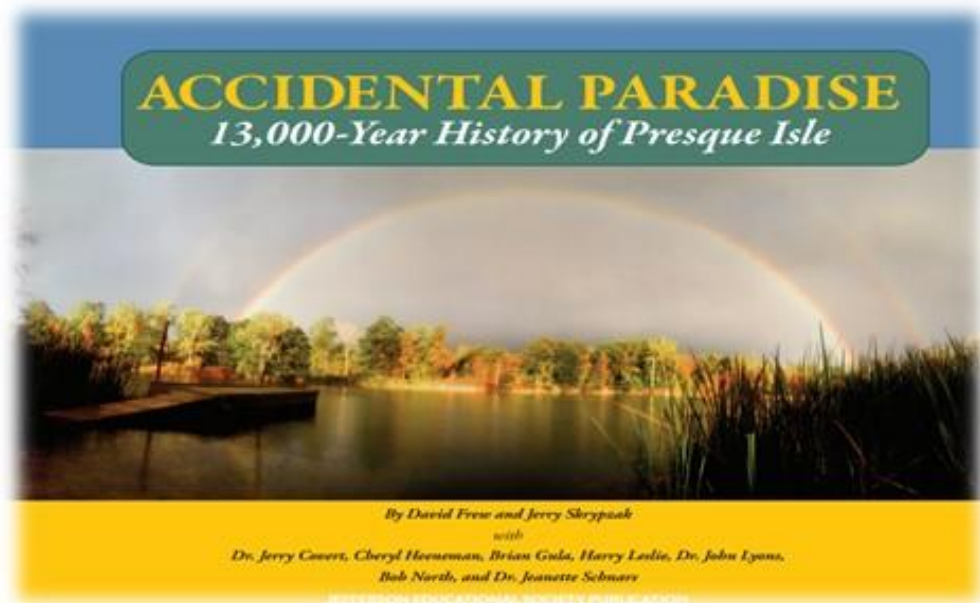
*This once-thriving neighborhood institution was boarded up
a few years ago after a shooting incident.*

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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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