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Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

**Neighborhood Cobbler:
*Taking Care of One of Our Biggest Investments***

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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*'I'm Buster Brown, and I live in a shoe.
Here's my dog Tide, he lives in there too.'*



Early Buster Brown magazine advertisement

Footwear was one of the biggest investments in the life of a Bay Rat. Most of us had three pairs. Good shoes for school and church, everyday shoes, which were usually the previous good shoes, and sneakers. PF Flyers or similar brands, which were lightweight, fast, and helped us make necessary getaways. Going downtown to one of the established shoe stores or to a department store shoe department to buy shoes was like making an investment. Shoes were pricey. They had to be selected carefully and taken care of. Proper ongoing maintenance always included the choice of and regular visits to a shoemaker and fortunately there were three within easy walking distance in the neighborhood. Technically, the “shoemaker shops” that we visited regularly were actually “shoe repair” shops.

The classic shoemaker who once worked in small neighborhood shops, crafting handmade footwear and making shoes last a long time, has been replaced by shoe factories. As in most developing industries, thousands of small entrepreneurs have been replaced by just a few huge manufacturers. Erie’s glorious downtown included several dedicated shoe stores as well as a number of shoe departments. The specialty stores were outlets for mid-level brands including Thom McAn and Hanover, while the high-end brands, including Nunn-Bush and Florsheim, were sold in department stores (Boston Store) and or men’s clothing stores, including PA Meyers and Isaac Baker.

MORE "That's-for-me" STYLES FOR YOU
 ...at Thom McAn

HERE'S COMFORT IN A SHOE THAT'S VIRILE,
 OUR NEW TWO-EYELET STYLE, THE TYROL.
 WEAR IT - FEEL AND LOOK YOUR BEST!
 IN THE ACTIVE FALL SEMESTER!

6583

THIS ONE'S GOING
 OVER BAG,
 REALLY 'SOLID' MAN,
 JUST DID
 THAT CHESTNUT-COLORED
 HEATHER LEATHER --
 (STORM WELT KEEPS
 OUT ANY WEATHER)

6540

IS THIS THE PERFECT SHOE FOR AUTUMN?
 ASK THE FELLOWS WHO HAVE BOUGHT 'EM.
 THE BOLDLY-STITCHED AND RUGGED LEATHER
 DOTES ON CRISP OCTOBER WEATHER!

6237

"That's for me" — Thom McAn loves to
 hear it . . . and we do, every day. It takes
 a lot of styles to please everybody. That's
 why Thom McAn offers the biggest selection
 in town (over 150 styles). Save yourself a
 lot of shopping around (and money, too) by
 looking first at Thom McAn — so good, it's
 the best-selling shoe in all America!

\$7⁹⁵

Thom McAn
 A Division of Melville Shoe Corporation, 25 West 43rd Street, New York City

This magazine ad indicates the market niche sought by Thom McAn.



Nunn-Bush focused on the high-end market

Once a person had acquired a pair of shoes, regular visits to shoemaking shops were required. At those places a person could order new heels, new soles, and other accessories. Shoelaces, polish, waterproofing, and special insoles were also regularly available. For the very cool kids, there were heel plates: metal guards that transformed walking Bay Rats into loud-clicking machines and allegedly extended the life of the heels. From time to time our grade school, St. Andrew, prohibited heel plates because their clacking was loud and annoying on marble floors. And there was also regular maintenance. We were admonished to drop off our shoes for periodic maintenance. It was quite like buying a new automobile, and the shoemaker represented the service department.

Maintenance or repair visits often revealed the harsh reality of imprudent shoe selections. Talking a pair of budget shoes, like Tom McAn's, to a neighborhood shoemaker would often result in our being thrown out and humiliated; being told that we had purchased shoes that were absolute "junk." Many neighborhood

shoemakers were like the “soup Nazi” of Seinfeld television fame. They were temperamental, often had thick accents, and never had time to waste on foolishness. When we managed to purchase a quality pair of shoes, on the other hand, shoemakers handled them with care and complimented us on making a good choice. If and when a shoemaker agreed to do a repair, we were made to feel fortunate as our names were boldly printed on a pick-up ticket and we received half of the perforated bit of cardboard as a receipt.



A traditional shoe repair shop

Shoemaking (repair) shops were wondrous places. They were filled with smells of leather and machine oil and lined with gears and belts that turned perpetually. Those leather belts powered dozens of specialized polishing wheels, grinders, and cutting tools. In addition to mending shoes, neighborhood shoemakers repaired belts, purses, and other leather goods. And as we were to discover, they were adept at repairing sports equipment. The closest shoe repair shop for us was on the east end of the 900 block of West Fourth Street and its proprietor was a sports fan. Early on, we learned he was happy to fix baseball gloves or footballs. He would even put a stitch or two in a baseball if needed.



One of Erie's last shoe repair shops

Most shoe repair shops slowly disappeared during the 1960s. Cars encouraged people to travel away from inner-city neighborhoods to shop. The Millcreek Mall was about to appear, scarring the downtown forever. In town after town throughout America, small neighborhood shoe repair shops were replaced by

large establishments that opened at malls, where there was more foot traffic. Erie was no different. Most neighborhood shops disappeared.

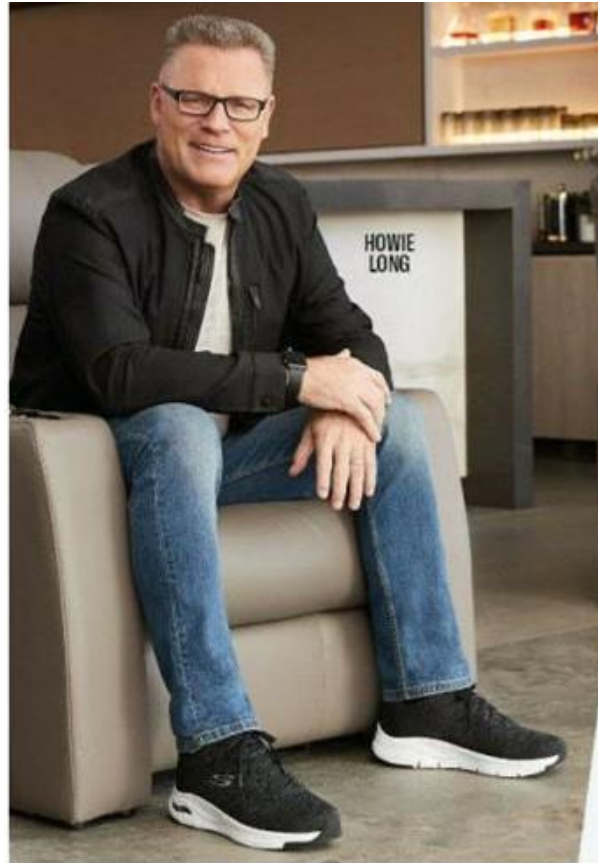
Gone but not forgotten was one of the strangest artifacts of the downtown shoe business, the footwear-fitting X-ray machine. While the basic machine was invented in the 1920s, X-ray fitting devices did not become commonplace until the 1940s, especially in smaller cities like Erie. At first no one questioned the logic of irradiating a child's feet while the salesman and parents studied the fit. The argument in favor of such practices was driven by both the expense of a new pair of shoes as well as the harm that could be done if they were ill-fitting. The earliest negative reactions to the shoe-fitting machine followed the bombing of Japan near the end of World War II. For the first time, the public was made painfully aware of the incredible toll that exposure to radiation could extract.



The infamous fluoroscope, or shoe-fitting X-ray machine

Eventually, evidence of the harm done by fluoroscopes accumulated. Kids were clearly receiving far too much harmful radiation. But as bad as the machines were for children, who may have been exposed a few times per year, they were deadly for the salesmen who stood next to leaky X-ray devices several times per day. Fluoroscopes were banned in Pennsylvania in 1957 and have since made their way onto several lists of “the worst ideas of all time,” as exposed children began to show symptoms of radiation disease, including basil cell carcinoma of the feet. A lack of data has made it impossible to assess the damage to shoe store employees exposed to radiation after having received no training. Unlike modern X-ray

technicians, who protect themselves by moving away from the immediate area and shelter behind lead screens and have several years of technical training, the unfortunate salespeople who operated shoe fluoroscopes had almost no training or protection.



Ex-NFL football player Howie Long relaxes in his “relaxed-fit Sketchers.”

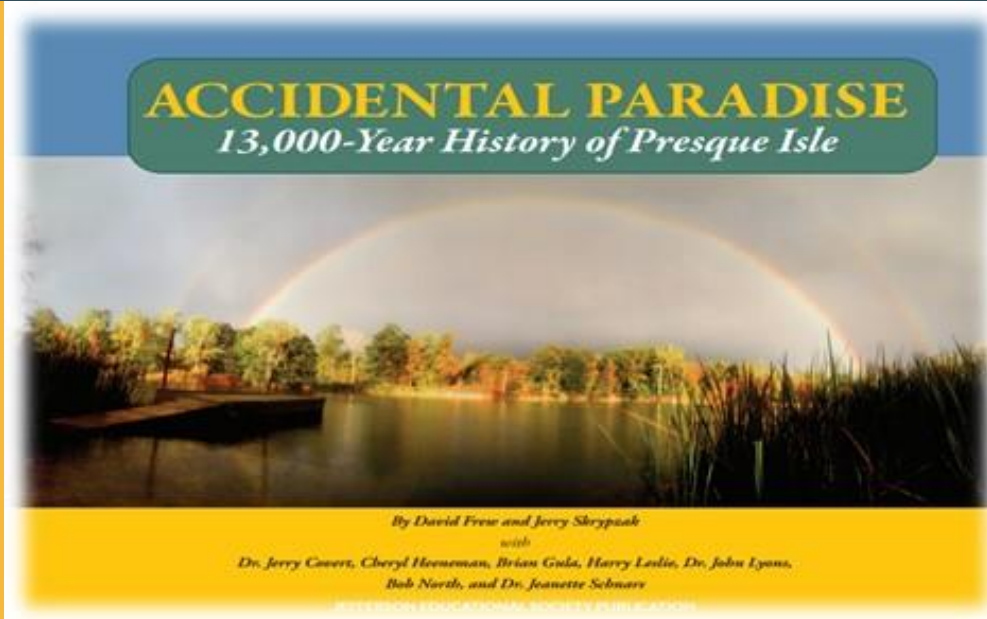
Much has changed in the modern era of shoe manufacturing and sales. Modern trends have accelerated toward offshore production of shoes, mass distribution, television sales campaigns, and an amazing trend toward shoe comfort rather than traditional styles. These days it is not unusual to see celebrities wearing sports shoes with formal suits as they tout comfort and ease. But just in case, I am hanging onto my old Florsheim wingtips.

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Accidental Paradise
by Dr. David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak



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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@TREC.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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