

A Little Dusting of Snow on My Hometown

When it comes to public relations, small towns and cities usually come up short in national and global news stories.

This has always been true of my hometown of Erie, PA whose most common claim to fame is its regular appearance in the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle as a four-letter urban word beginning with “E.”

Nevertheless, Erie does have one perennial world-class distinction – it usually leads the nation in snowfall. This is due to a relatively rare weather condition known as “lake-effect snow.” Simply explained, a cold air mass crosses a body of water which is warmer, picks up its water vapor, freezes it, and deposits the resulting snow when it reaches the shore.

The southern shore of Lake Erie is one of the world’s major sites for lake-effect snow because it is often in the direct path of Arctic cold waves. Cleveland, Erie and Buffalo usually contend for the national championship for annual urban snowfall, and Erie often leads the pack.

As I write this, however, news stories and photos across the nation and around the world are featuring Erie’s latest snow

“dusting” because, even by my hometown’s standards, this is a big one.

In less than two days, more than 60 inches of snow have fallen on the city. The previous one-day record in Erie was 20 inches on November 22, 1956. (I remember that day distinctly because it was Thanksgiving Day, and the family dinner was at our house. I was a young boy, and I was thrilled that it not only meant I could hang out with my aunts, uncles and cousins longer than usual, but it also meant school was closed for more a week.)

I still have friends and family in Erie, so I have been calling there to make sure everyone is o.k. Some old friends live in North East, PA, about 20 miles from downtown in Erie at the east end of the county. They only received 12 inches of snow because lake effect snow is often very limited, controlled as it is by southerly winds. Life for them is normal for winter, and they are as much curious onlookers to the nearby historic blizzard as are those living in far-away Madrid, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, and Capetown.

In the past, Erie has had some interesting distinctions. A typical manufacturing rust belt city, it once led the world in the production of nuts and bolts, meters, fine paper and, until recently, diesel locomotives. Those days are now over. Many of the big industrial names in Erie, including Hammermill Paper, Kaiser Aluminum, Bucyrus-Erie, Zurn, American Sterilizer, Marx Toys, and Erie Forge and Steel, are long gone. General Electric, once one of the nation’s largest plants, seems on the verge of leaving. Erie

Insurance, the city's only Fortune 500 company, is now the leading local industry, as are other white collar employers in the city's hospital/medical, college/university and tourist industries.

These commercial trends are the way of the modern world. Everything does change. Only Erie's world-class beaches on its Presque Isle peninsula (which forms a protective arm for the city's port and waterfront) are a constant. But even they (since the peninsula is really a giant sandbar) are shifting and reforming along the lake.

The snow however, as it has for thousand of years, keeps falling in great and noteworthy amounts. Where I live now, in Minnesota, there is not so much snow, but there are numbing below-zero temperatures that are not felt in Erie. The great lake, in addition to it legendary snow effect, also protects the city from extreme cold.

Robert Frost in his wonderful poem "Fire and Ice" spoke of eternal outcomes of heat and cold. Nature, of course, makes the choices, and in the end, it is the greatest force for truly newsworthy public relations.

Thousands of Erieites are now sitting in their homes, waiting for the storm to abate, Their cars are snowed in, their streets are choked and undriveable. In the hustle-bustle of our modern world, there aren't many indelible opportunities for families to have no choice but just be together for a

while. I remember fondly such a moment during that Thanksgiving in Erie in 1956.

I hope the neighbors of my hometown are enjoying their historic occasion.