

# An Era of Elegance & Grandeur

## Part II Victorian Life

Did you ever stop to wonder...

When did bicycles become popular?

Where did the people of Erie shop before upper Peach Street was developed?

What high fashion magazines did men and women read before *Glamour Magazine*?

The answers to these questions can be found when taking a closer look at the Victorian Era (1837 – 1901). Social and economic changes caused by the Industrial Revolution led to improved lives for most Americans. The Industrial Revolution was a time of dramatic change - mass-produced goods from factories replaced handmade items, causing prices to drop, and making exclusive and hard-to-make items available to the poor and not just the rich and elite. This improved way-of-life helped spark a cultural revolution. Taking cues from England, Americans maintained strict social rules, and made advancements in fashion, art, literature and leisure.

### Erie's Social Dictator

One hundred and nine West Sixth Street, a building now owned by Gannon University, holds an important place in Erie's social history. Construction of the Strong Mansion began in 1888, and was financed by William L. Scott who, through his dealings in the coal and shipping trades, as well as his political involvement as mayor of the City of Erie, became widely known as one of the most energetic and wealthy men in this country. The impressive four-story, 46-room structure was built as a wedding gift for his daughter, Annie Wainwright and her husband-to-be, Charles Hamot Strong, who gained his own distinction as a respected businessman, amassing more than \$50 million through investments in railroads and utilities. It cost an amazing \$480,000 to construct, and an additional \$800,000 to furnish it – at a time when the average skilled workman earned a salary of \$9.00 per week.

During the Strong family's occupancy of the mansion, their staff of 40 to 50 servants enabled them to entertain in lavish style, such guests as President William Taft, a Yale classmate of Charles Strong, and President Grover Cleveland. Annie Strong's home was the social hub of Erie well into the twentieth century. The city's social and cultural trendsetter, she introduced Newport-style lavishness to Erie's wealthy elite, and her tastes were widely imitated even after her death in the 1930's. A November 1934 article in *Fortune* magazine described her as "Erie's social dictator."

### A Source for 19<sup>th</sup> Century Fashion Dos & Don'ts

Several different ladies' magazines were printed during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They provided instruction for proper etiquette, women's crafts (sewing, embroidery, crocheting), proper homemaking, and entertaining, and included examples of contemporary literature. Although often masked, they also served as an outlet for the women's rights movement, bringing to the forefront equality by gender.

Some of the most read women's magazines included *The Delineator* (1873 – 1937), *The Ladies Home Journal* (1883 – present), *Good Housekeeping* (1885 – present), *Woman's World* (1884 – 1940), and *Harper's Bazar* (1867 – present).

### Meet Me Under the Clock!

Whether one was looking for a sack suit – a gentleman's suit of either black or gray, which would eventually

evolve into the modern three-piece suit – or a new winter evening gown, or simply an outfit accessory such as a hat, parasol (small umbrella), fan or brooch featured in one of the ladies’ magazines of the time, the people of Erie found their fashion necessities at the **Boston Store**.

### **A Quote-worthy Quote**

Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society. - Mark Twain

### **The Victorian Language of the Fan**

During the Victorian Era, dating was considered more of a career move than a romantic time of wooing. Young men carefully selected women of equal social status, for once a marriage was complete, all of his bride’s belongings became his property. Young women were properly groomed from an early age to fulfill the role of wife and mother. Young women learned to sing and dance, to recite literature of the day, and the rules of etiquette...such as how to flirt with a fan!

The following is one interpretation of the language of the fan.

- THE FAN PLACED NEAR THE HEART: You have won my love.
- A CLOSED FAN TOUCHING THE RIGHT EYE: When may I be allowed to see you?
- THE NUMBER OF STICKS SHOWN ANSWERED THE QUESTION: At what hour?
- HIDING THE EYES BEHIND AN OPEN FAN: I love you.
- SHUTTING A FULLY OPENED FAN SLOWLY: I promise to marry you.
- DRAWING THE FAN ACROSS THE EYES: I am sorry.
- LETTING THE FAN REST ON THE RIGHT CHEEK: Yes.
- LETTING THE FAN REST ON THE LEFT CHEEK: No.
- PUTTING THE FAN HANDLE TO THE LIPS: Kiss me.
- PLACING THE FAN BEHIND THE HEAD WITH FINGER EXTENDED: Goodbye.
- FAN HELD OVER LEFT EAR: I wish to get rid of you.
- DRAWING THE FAN THROUGH THE HAND: I hate you!

### **Poetry – A Deliberate Arrangement of Words**

Children and adults were expected to be familiar with poetry and other forms of literature of the day, for literature was often recited for pleasure. Read the following poem “The Evening Star,” written by Henry W. Longfellow. It appears as it was printed in the January 1850 issue of Godey’s Lady’s Book. Create an illustration for Mr. Longfellow’s poem. (Use a dictionary or encyclopedia to look up words that are unfamiliar to you.)

Just above yon sandy bar,  
As the day grows fainter and dimmer,  
Lonely and lovely, a single star  
Lights the air with a dusky glimmer.  
Into the ocean, faint and far,  
Falls the trail of Its golden splendor;  
And the gleam of that single star  
Is ever refulgent, soft, and tender.  
Chrysaor, rising out of the sea,  
Showed thus glorious and thus emulous,  
Leaving the arms of Callirrhoe,  
For ever tender, soft, and tremulous.

Thus, o'er the ocean, faint and far,  
Trailed the gleam of his falchion brightly:  
Is it a god, or is it a star,  
That, entranced, I gaze on nightly!

### **Children's Toys & Games**

Toys in America were made from the vast supply of natural resources that dotted the land: wood, tin and iron. Between 1800 and 1850 several small American firms made wood toys, but only in small quantities. The discovery of tin ore mines in the United States, and the introduction of the mechanical stamping machines, which allowed tinplate to be quickly stamped into shapes through the use of dies and heavy presses, led to the popularity of tin toys. Large-scale toy manufacturing was established following the American Civil War, when many cities became industrial centers.

Erie County could not escape this national toy-making revolution. During the early 1900s, the Ferdinand J. Strauss Company, a mechanical toy manufacturing company, contracted C.E. Carter of Erie to produce "Zippo the Climbing Monkey" and the "Alabama Minstrel Dancer," two of the first lithographed tinplate mechanical toys mass-produced in America. Louis Marx, a young man born in Brooklyn, New York in 1896, joined the Strauss Co. workforce at the age of 16, and showed great potential immediately. Marx used his experience with Strauss to create the Louis Marx & Company with his brother David, and began to hire manufacturers to produce toys in 1919. In 1922, Louis Marx & Co. purchased the struggling Strauss Co., and the dies for the climbing monkey and the "Alabama Minstrel Dancer," and although these toys had been on the market for twenty years, Marx gave them bright colors and made larger than before. The company quickly sold 8 million copies of each. Marx went on to open his first toy manufacturing plant at 1816 Raspberry Street, Erie.

### **Try It! The King's Garden Game**

The following excerpt was taken from Mrs. L. Maria Child's The Girl's Own Book, a book first published in 1834, which lists games, crafts and toys considered appropriate for young girls.

This is very much like "The House That Jack Built." One may try to say it alone, and pay a forfeit for any mistake: or it may be said by a circle successively. The first passes a key to the next one, saying, "I sell you the key of the king's garden;" the next passes it, and says, "I sell you the string that ties the key of the king's garden;" the third says, "I sell you the rat, that gnawed the string, that ties the key of the king's garden;" the fourth says, "I sell you the cat, that caught the rat, that gnawed the string, that ties the key of the king's garden;" the fifth says, "I sell you the dog, that bit the cat, that caught the rat, that gnawed the string, that ties the key of the king's garden." My young readers can add as much to it as they please.

### **A Two-Wheeled Revolution**

Although the first bicycle was designed during the 1860s, cycling did not become a fad of major proportions until the 1880s. Known as the "Golden Age of Bicycles," bicycling clubs for both men and women flourished on both sides of the Atlantic, and touring and racing were the rage.

Erie, a growing industrial center during the nineteenth century, occupies its very own page in the history of cycling. Locally manufactured bicycles were sold in cities across the United States. The *Tribune*, produced by Black Manufacturing Company during the bicycle's "heyday," became one of the most recognized bicycle models to be made in Erie, PA. Not only were cycles manufactured here, Erie also produced world-class riders. After racing locally for several years, champion cyclist **Otto Maya** competed against athletes from other states and nations in major contests between 1896 and 1906 after; most noteworthy were the six - day team races at the old Madison Square Garden in New York.