

Lilies of the field

Inspiring flower a favorite for Easter. **10C**



Alien invaders

Strange species leave lasting impression on lake.



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50¢

WEATHER



Sunny, breezy, warmer
High: 79 Low: 54
Sunset: 8:02 p.m.
Forecast, 12B

INSIDE

Map of you

The book of genetic instructions for the human body is complete to an accuracy of 99.99 percent, an achievement now considered the foundation for a new era of medical advances.
Up Close, 3A

Streetwise

It's back. City Council is considering a citywide curfew that would keep children and teens 16 and younger off Erie streets from 11 p.m. to 6 a.m.
City & Region, 1B



Opening act

Despite a 50-point loss on the season opener, the Erie Illusion players are pleased with their first encounter in the world of women's football.
Sports, 1D

Trading crazes

How is your school's team faring in this year's Stock Market Game? The Week 7 results are in.
Business, 1C

Fun for kids

From sunny ocean shores to Civil War history, the Old Line State has it all. What state is this? Find out with activities inside.
The Mini Page, 8B

DEATHS

- Balko, Eleanor**
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- Gregory, Hilda G.**
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Jobless rate at 11-year high

Manufacturing hit hardest as Erie County unemployment climbs

By PETER PANEPENTO
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The economic downturn earned another dubious distinction in February as Erie County's unemployment rate reached 8.8

percent — its highest level in 11 years.

The last time the county had a jobless rate higher than 8.8 percent was February 1992, when the rate hit 9.2 percent. At that time, Erie County's

economic fate was tied closely to national conditions — the U.S. jobless rate was 8.2 percent.

This time, however, Erie County workers are much worse off than others nationally. The national unadjusted unemploy-

ment rate was 6.4 percent in February, while Pennsylvania's rate was 7.0 percent.

Erie has been hit hard largely because the recent economic

► Please see COUNTY, 6A

By the numbers

February 2003 jobless rate:

8.8 percent
 in Erie County

6.2 percent
 in Pennsylvania

5.8 percent
 in the United States

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

'Major combat over'



U.S. soldiers arrest a group of men in a Baghdad street Monday, accusing them of driving a vehicle with weapons and attempting to ambush U.S. troops. U.S. soldiers and local citizens claimed members of the group were non-Iraqi Arab fighters.

TIKRIT FALLS

Last city succumbs to U.S.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit fell Monday with unexpectedly light resistance, the last Iraqi city to succumb to overpowering U.S.-led ground and air forces. A senior Pentagon general said "major combat engagements" probably are over in the 26-day-old war.

As fighting wound down, Pentagon officials disclosed plans to pull two aircraft carriers from the Persian Gulf. At the same time, Iraqi power brokers looked ahead to discussions on a postwar government at a U.S.-arranged meeting set for today. "I would anticipate that the major combat engagements are over," Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal told reporters at the Pentagon.

Secretary of State Colin Powell hinted at economic or diplomatic sanctions against Syria, saying the government is developing a weapons of mass destruction program and helping Iraqis flee the dying regime.

Looting eased in Baghdad after days of plundering at government buildings, hospitals and an antiquities museum, and a group of religious and civil opposition leaders met in the capital to plan efforts at renewing power, water, security and other vital services.

American forces found prodigious amounts of Iraqi weaponry, French-made missiles and Russian anti-tank

► Please see MAJOR, 6A

IN HONOR OF ERIE'S OWN

'These young men ... deserve respect'



Army Reserve Spc. Joe Irizarry says although he didn't know Army Spc. Donald Oaks Jr., he paid respects to the fallen soldier because the military is like a family.

About 1,200 family, friends, strangers honor fallen Harborcreek soldier

By SCOTT WESTCOTT
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Army Reserve Spc. Joe Irizarry never met Army Spc. Donald Samuel Oaks Jr., but he felt it was his duty Monday to pay final respects to a fellow soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice. "He's part of our family, too," Irizarry said of Oaks, who was killed in action in Iraq. "Even if I didn't know him, a fallen soldier is a fallen soldier. ... You never

expect it to hit so close to home, but it happens. We know when we sign up, this can happen."

Irizarry was among more than 1,000 family, friends, acquaintances and strangers that entered the Warner Theatre on Monday to pay last respects to Oaks, the only Erie County soldier to be killed in the war with Iraq. Oaks and two other soldiers were killed by

► Please see SERVICE, 6A



Donald Samuel Oaks Jr.

■ **Service:** A funeral service will be held today at 11 a.m. at the Warner Theatre, 811 State St., Erie. Burial will follow at Wintergreen Gorge Cemetery.

Lingering winter leaves snowbirds leery of coming home to roost

JOAN BENSON-CACCHIONE
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Shivers from an early April snow here rippled south, deep into sunny Florida. Erie's icy breeze ruffled feathers among its flock of snowbirds wintering there.

"I just got off the phone with a client of mine in Naples who's scheduled to come back in a few

weeks," said Eric Dahlstrand, manager of Miller Travel Services. "So," the conversation went on a day when forecasters in Erie called for wind, snow, sleet and a high of 37. "Do you think another few weeks is enough?"

The man was only half-joking. A dilemma now floats before him in the dreamy Southern surf, as well as for others who ducked winter by winging south last fall:

When to come home? What if winter still roams these parts?

Sure, it's nice today, but Erie's Florida corps knows that winter-like blasts can hit here at any time in spring, up until just after the Memorial Day picnic.

Erie's snowbirds — an estimated 3,400 to 4,000, based on temporary change-of-address requests

► Please see COLD, 7A



ROB ENGELHARDT/Erie Times-News

Callen Cochran, 8, of Franklin, ventures out onto the ice Monday at Presque Isle State Park. Despite sunny skies and summerlike temperatures, Beach 6 isn't quite ready for swimmers. See story, 7A.