

Brooklyn's Very Own Jacques Cousteau

By Shavana Abruzzo
Professional diver and amateur archeologist Gene Ritter is convinced that great treasures lie beneath the rolling waters of Coney Island

"The place is a gold mine for old artifacts," discloses the 31-year-old Sheepshead Bay resident, who has scoured the sea bed from Brighton Beach to Coney Island and salvaged

piece upon piece of glassware, old coins, ammunition parts, fishing equipment, jewelry and other intact memorabilia, dating from the late 1800s to the mid 1950s.

"There's even a shipwreck and part of the old Brighton Pier down there," gasps the former John Dewey High School student, who wants to share his archeological findings with fans of local nostalgia, but discovers that state law forbids him from "raping the wreck."

The current shipwreck law, according to Ritter, denies divers from salvaging any underwater wreckage without a Coast Guard permit or government supervision.

"It's like telling someone that they can't go hiking in a wildlife preserve without a permit because naturalists want to keep it as is," says Lenny Speregen—equipment specialist for the Professional Diving Archeology organization which is in the process of being formed—adding that essentially the diving industry is being snubbed by the state, even though it has "been responsible but left uncredited for" discovering a vast amount of marine archeology. And there's still a lot more just waiting to be discovered, say the divers.

"Brooklyn's artifacts will one day be antiques and we want to develop a close working partnership



Left to right, Adrian Sam, divers Gene Ritter and Lenny Speregen, and boat captain/operations technician Arnie Navan go over their equipment checklist for a last-minute briefing before their latest underwater expedition.

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Divers Gene Ritter (left) and Lenny Speregen are ready to go where no fish has gone before.

Photos by Allan J. Fromberg

with the state, which will enable us to display marine archeology to its maximum potential and allow us mobility with it as we preserve a part of the borough's history," continues Ritter, founder and president of PDA, a not-for-profit organization, which is in the throes of filing an application for authorization to collect and excavate archeological and paleontological materials on state land.

So far, Ritter's submarine treasures have included glassware from Beadleston & Woerz Empire Brewery

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Lost in the home loan jungle?



In Search of Ancient Brooklyn

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in Manhattan, J.C. Hecht, formerly on Central Avenue in Brooklyn, Geo Es-selborn & Son in Manhattan, Baas Beverages, estab-

lished in 1876, Gentile Bot-tling Company (no ad-dress), Schweickert & Baas of Coney Island, and the Alex Campbell milk com-pany.

State approval, says Rit-ter, could mean the begin-ning of an exciting new wave of research into the depths of the East River.

Ritter, formerly of Har-vey's dive store on Em-mons Avenue, recently read an article in this newspaper about an island, long sub-merged under the Ver-razano Bridge and the ma-rine wiz is making it his next project. But first there are reels of red tape to snip through before PDA and other professional divers can tread legal water, says Ritter, currently operations manager of Pan Aqua diving shop in Manhattan.

Misrepresented as "sea rapists," Ritter argues that professional divers attempt to enrich reef development and motivate the private sector to create recreational areas for such purposes.

According to the Long Island Divers Association, whose members pride themselves on "rescuing objects from the sea which would be lost forever," dredging, trawlers and nat-ural elements cause greater damage to historical ship-wrecks than divers simply trying to seek out and preserve antiquity.

It is an antiquity which should not become the ex-clusive property of individ-ual groups, says Ritter, but rather the focus of a mutual archeological venture with the state to determine the fate of what lies at the bot-tom of the oceans.

"Through the PDA, we hope to establish a credible reputation for professional divers and invite colleges and other marine organiza-tions to work closely with us on future underwater projects," continues Ritter, a licensed aircraft mechan-ic, whose entrepreneurial gusto and diving skills have lured members who are boat owners, underwater specialists, marine produc-ers, researchers and histori-ans from the metropolitan area, including Artie

Navan, Michael Agostino, Milo Pinckney, Rick Der-by, Adrian Sam, David Sil-verstein, Sid and Pamela Schlomann, Joe Koppel-man, Mike Feldbaum, Ted Kavowras and Ilya Zilber-man.

Armed with 17 years of diving experience and an appetite whet by marine history, Ritter ignored cyni-cal fellow divers who warned him of "the pollu-tion, bad visibility and strong currents" in Coney Island and, three years ago, plunged into an exhaustive research of the coastline area.

Poring over local maps, books and film footage at the Brooklyn Historical So-ciety, the New York Public Library and the New York Film Library, the motivated diver constructed a step-by-step diving report, which is fast becoming a navigational plan for pin-pointing areas "all but pol-luted" with memories, com-plete with artifacts, of a for-mer Brooklyn.

And everyday, a new slice of history emerges for the submariner supreme, who last week, while on a photographic and promo-tional video session came across hot rivets from the original steel pier, some charred wood pieces--car-bon-scored in such a way as to suggest they are artifacts of the original pier fin of the early 1900s--and a 19th Century anchor, half-buried in the sand near West Brighton Beach.

"The anchor was made of lead and resembled the kind you usually see tat-toed on a sailor's arm," says Ritter, who is fer-vently hoping for a renaiss-ance of Coney Island.

"As a teenager, I used to work in Nathan's and on the rides in Luna Park--it's sad to see the area go down the drain," he says, adding that PDA will continue to locate and document Brooklyn's archeological marine history simply be-cause, "professional diving is all about enjoying your-self, while preserving a her-itage."

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