

Diving Into Bklyn's Historic Past

BROOKLYN P • E • O • P • L • E

By Ethan Feinsilver

In search of underwater ruins and fabled treasure ships known only through histories of the city, Bensonhurst's Gene Ritter will be exploring beneath New York City's East River during the coming months. It will be the second mission for his company, Professional Diving Archaeology -- a group that was formed after Ritter happened upon turn-of-the-century remains of "Dreamland" and "Steeplechase Pier" under Coney Island waters two years ago. The discoveries touched off a passionate quest in the commercial diver who says, ironically, that his worst subject in school was always history.

One of the first sites Ritter's team plans to explore is the beach at Gravesend Bay. He expects to turn up evidence there of the British landing on their way over from Staten Island for the Battle of Long Island (now Brooklyn). Sparking Ritter's imagination about what he might find in Gravesend are the people he often sees fishing in the bay who get their lines tangled on underwater snags.

"They curse and say its probably an old washing machine or something. But I know better," Ritter said. The British "Corvette" is one warship known to have sunk there.

Another stop on the East River tour will take the divers in search of remnants of the former South Street seaport, the world's busiest at the turn of the century, according to Ritter's research.

One of the unique challenges presented by diving in the East River, in addition to very poor visibility on heavy sewage days, are the river's swift and changing currents. At two knots, Ritter said it becomes difficult to raise an arm against the current, which does reach four knots at times. The more the currents are studied, however, the "more friendly" they be-

come, Ritter said.

One unfriendly pattern the divers can never predict, though, are the tug boats and tankers using the river.

"They drop down 25 to 30 feet in the water," Ritter said. "If I'm diving at 40 feet and one goes over, I [would] get sucked into the propeller." The team has a rigorous monitoring system for this danger, but Ritter still called it his "biggest fear."

Ranking probably a close second is Ritter's fear of the state. Ritter works in the knowledge that at any moment the authorities may

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Gene Ritter explains some of the items he's displayed in a treasure chest to Retired U.S. Navy Colonel David Ramsey.



Russell Gilmore, Fort Hamilton Museum's resident historian, steps over to have a look as Gene Ritter (left) and Bay Ridge Historical Society President Susan Pulaski flip through photos of Coney Island in its hey-day -- around the turn of the century.

Photos by Ethan Feinsilver

Underwater Archeology in Brooklyn

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swoop in and take over anything he discovers, especially if it's something historically significant. The East River is public land (and water). The state does not have funds to pay for explorations like Ritter's, but should he find anything of interest, "they'll just come in and say, 'Thank you very much.' And they bring in their own crew," Ritter said.

The state's legitimate gripe is with those divers who plunder a historical site, changing its basic structure forever and selling the artifacts to private collectors who only show them to their dinner guests.

For that reason, Ritter tries to show the state that it shouldn't worry about his company. Their mission is strictly "show and tell."

The 1990 discovery went on display in the Brooklyn Public Library as

an exhibit of artifacts, photographs and research readings on the hey-day of Coney Island.

With professional underwater photographer Joe Koppelman on board for the East River venture, the goal is to interest investors in a documentary film or television show on the sites.

"The name of the game," Ritter said about exhibiting artifacts in museums or on television, "is trying to pinpoint their historical context." A rifle from 1963 is one thing; the gun that killed President Kennedy is another, he said. So when Ritter exhibits a find such as the 1847 Museum of Berlin medalion, he includes an old photo of some German navy crews visiting the island. Perhaps one of them dropped it.

Ritter estimated he spends twenty percent of

his time in the water, compared with 80 percent in the library, trying to connect stories with his underwater finds.

And that represents a sea change, as it were, for Ritter. Still without any formal schooling in archaeology (his only post-high-school education was in airplane mechanics), Ritter remembers always hating to hear about dates from history

teachers. ("I never could relate.") The day everything changed was the day he found his first shell in the sand...an anti-aircraft shell, that is.

"All of a sudden I'm holding something in my hands," he said, "and I want to know what this is. Where does it come from? I think all teachers should have artifacts they pass around the classroom."




Photo by Ethan Feinsilver

Dori and Vinny Ten peruse some of the finds in their brother Gene Ritter's hands-on display, following the unveiling of his East River plans at the Fort Hamilton Museum.

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