

# Delving Into Brooklyn History Above And Below the Surface

By Michael Hirsch

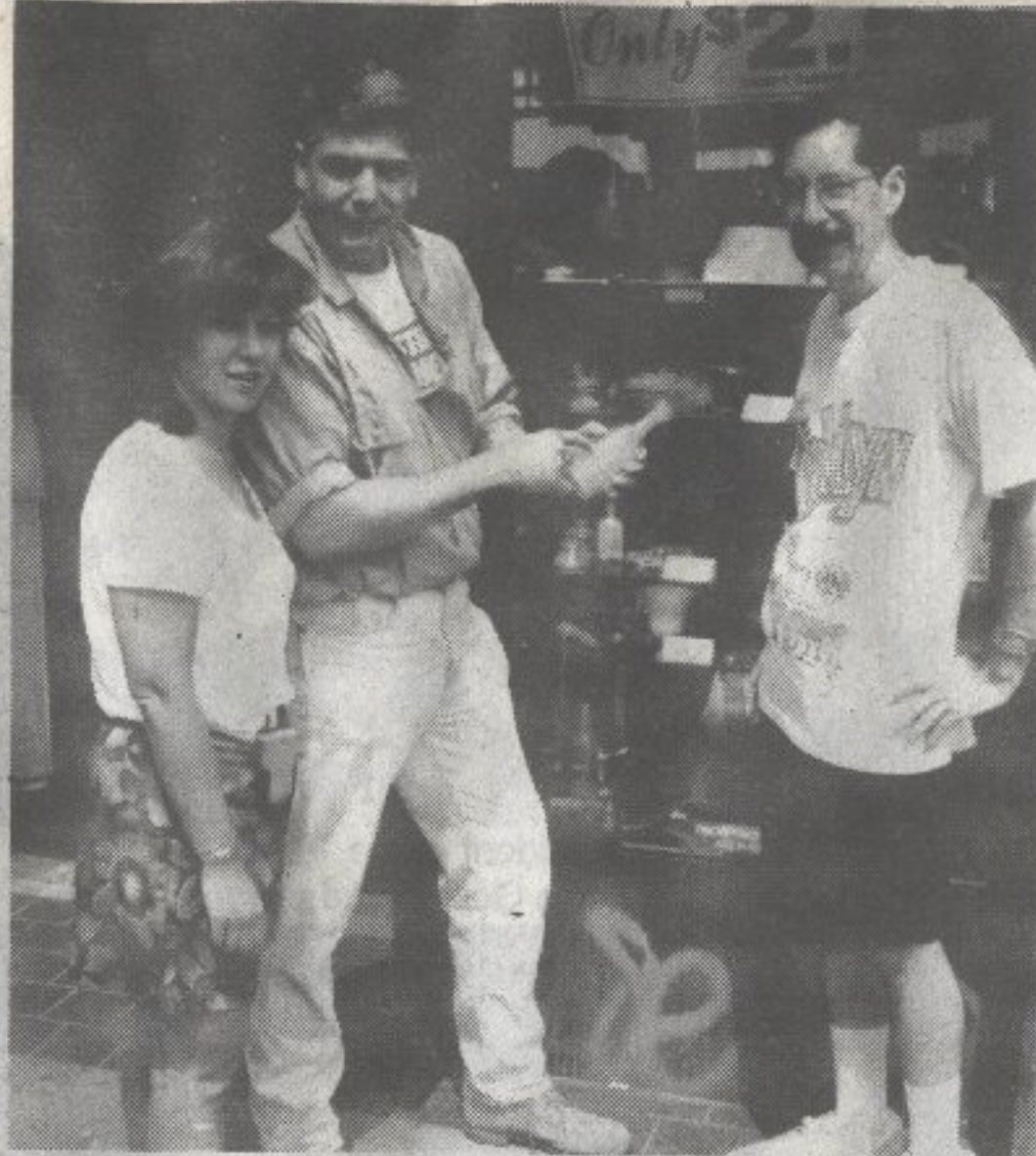
Ron Schweiger knows a lot about the Coney Island/Brighton Beach waterfront of a century ago.

He can tell you about the three world-class racetracks, the four-star hotels putting up 600 guests and seating 1,200 for dinner, the first-run legitimate theaters and first-rate vaudeville shows, all drawing the well-heeled and blue-blooded by rail and steamship from around the world.

Ask him nicely and he'll even show you the July 18, 1891 program from the famed Brighton Beach Music Hall, whose orchestra, scheduled to play selections from Richard Wagner, was led by a young and then-unknown assistant conductor named Victor Herbert. There's even a commercial ad in the program for "Lundy Brothers, wholesale dealers in fish, oysters, and clams."

A science and social-studies teacher at P.S. 219 in Flatlands who in his spare time is also working on a book about Flatbush's Victorian houses, Schweiger used to think he knew everything about the shorefront area, or at least everything above the boardwalk.

Then he met Gene Ritter, a commercial diver and president of Professional Diving Archeology who's been exploring below the

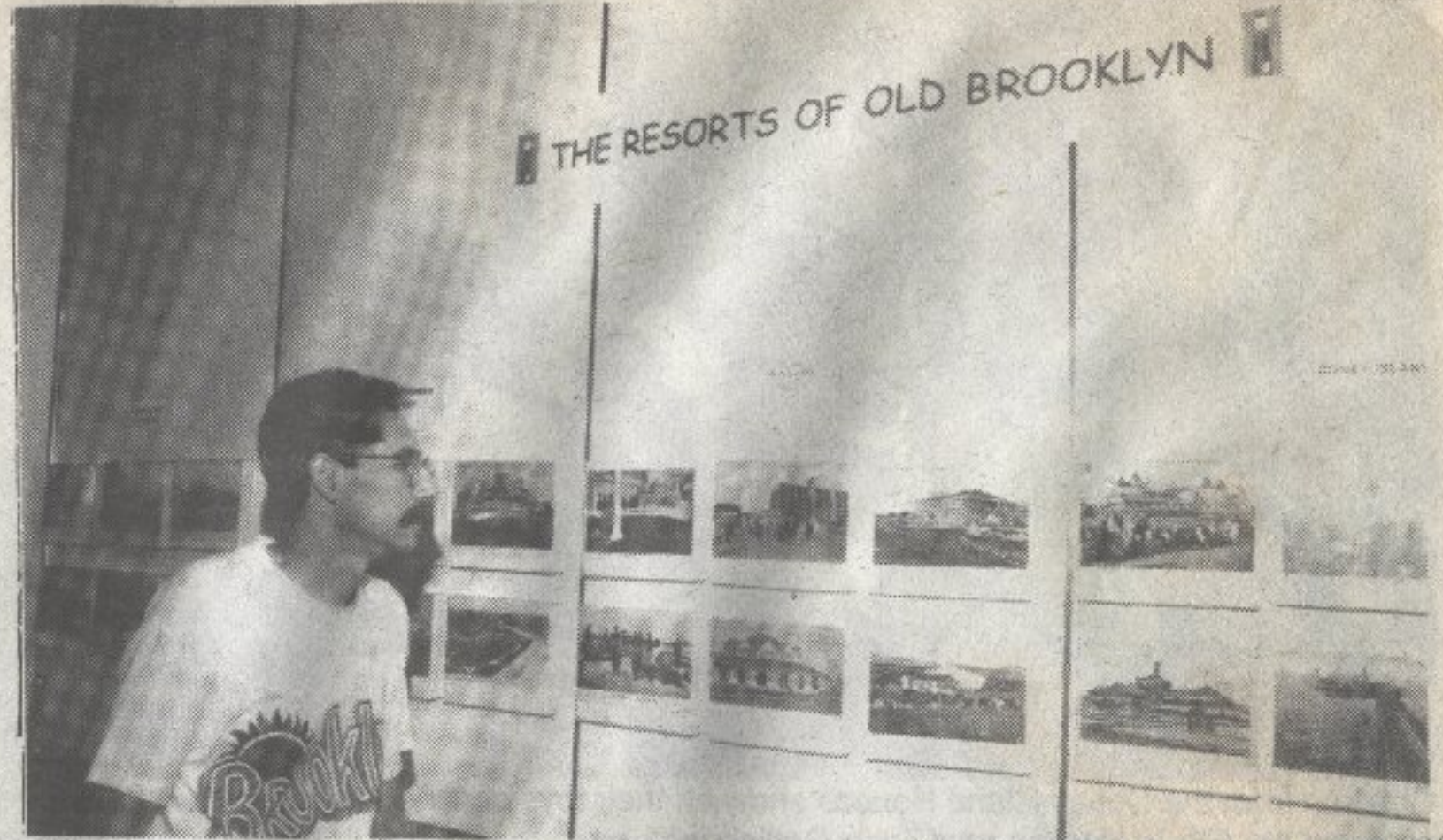


Professional Diving Archeology administrator Carole Toffales stands with diver Gene Ritter and historian Ron Schweiger in front of Mrs. Stahl's Knishes, where their collection of artifacts and memorabilia are on permanent display.

shoreline for years. Ritter says some of the most interesting stuff is underwater, too. And it's not just the tropical fish that get swept up in Gulf Stream waters and pulled into the Atlantic by September, or the flounder, fluke and striped bass that returned once the effects of a series of dangerous 1970s oil spills subsided.

What Ritter finds, just as Schweiger does, are objects that help preserve and understand local history. "We take artifacts and bring them to the neighborhoods. It helps local people get a sense of their own past," Ritter said.

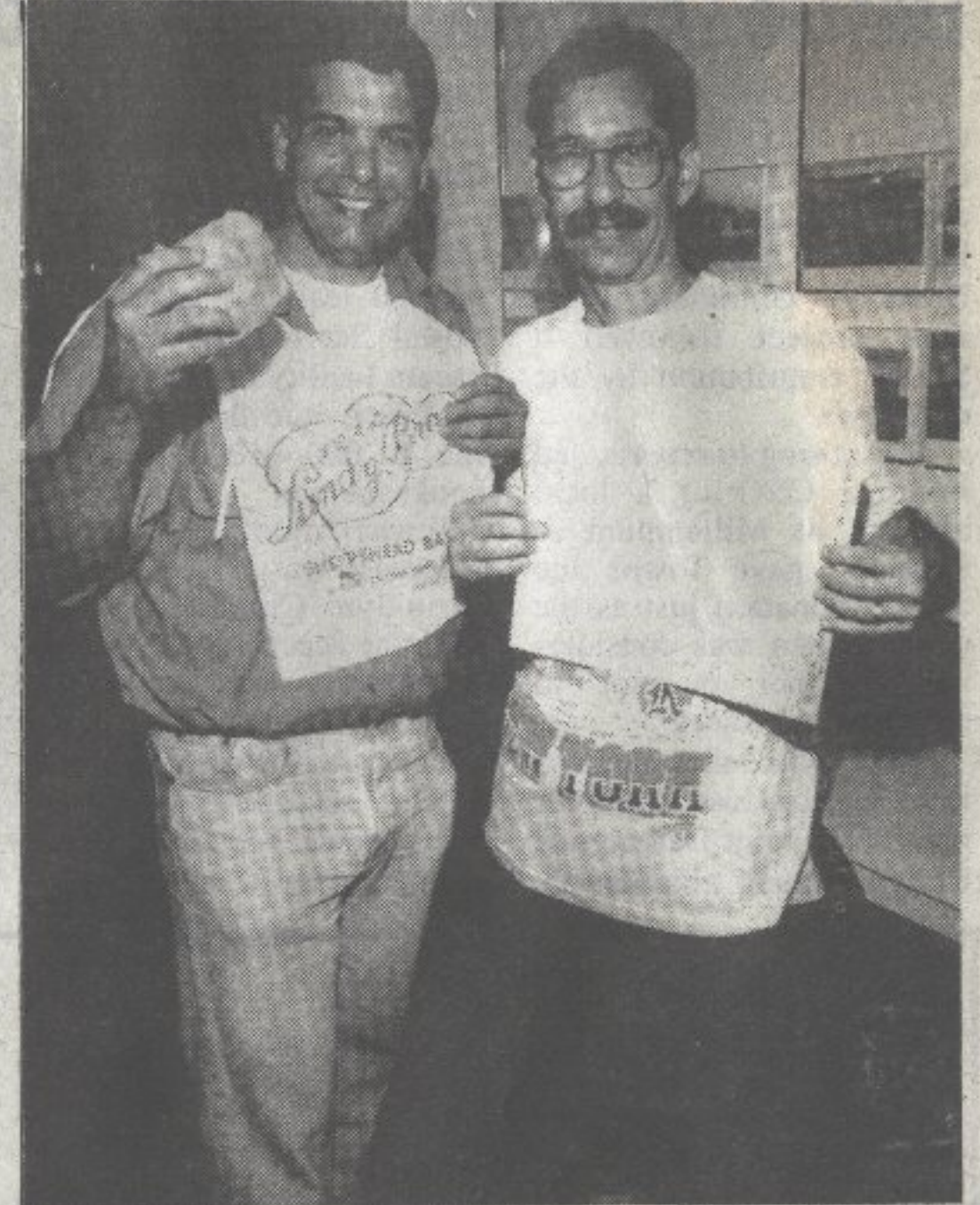
**History**  
**From Above and Below**  
**the Waterline**  
Now the two have teamed



Ron Schweiger looks at some of the turn-of-the-century postcards he has collected.

up on a permanent exhibit, "The Resorts of Old Brooklyn," that graces the walls and windows of Mrs. Stahl's Knishes, the venerable Brighton Beach landmark at 1001 Brighton Beach Avenue. On display are samples of some of Schweiger's thousands of Coney Island postcards, blown up and colorized by laser printer. These include scenes of the hotels, racetracks, piers, beachfront, railways and steamships that made Brooklyn's Atlantic waterfront a vacation paradise and one of the nation's premier seaside resort towns at the end of the last century.

There are lithographs of the Elysian but doomed Dreamland amusement park, now the site of the New York Aquarium. Opened in 1904, "It charging five cents for all the rides and attractions," says Schweiger, before it was gutted by an electrical fire on the evening before its scheduled Memorial Day 1911



Professional diver Gene Ritter (left) and local historian Ron Schweiger show some the artifacts and memorabilia on display at Mrs. Stahl's. Photos by Tim Thomson

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# NEWS

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## Historians Uncover Brooklyn's Past

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opening.

And in the Mrs. Stahl's window space that once held nothing more imaginative than knishes are samples of the artifacts Ritter has retrieved over the years. Included are remnants from the Dreamland pier, which housed a two-story restaurant that was destroyed along with the amusement park. All but forgotten, the imposing wharf, in its time longer than today's Steeplechase Pier, was literally rediscovered by Ritter during successive

dives in 1990. The research diver quickly brought up old bottles, plates, spoons and other kitchenware, many of which are on display at Mrs. Stahl's.

### With a Bullet

Other artifacts shown include a lightbulb and light fixture dating from the 1907 Steeplechase Pier fire, an original Coca-Cola bottle from 1915, a brown Coke bottle from 1905, and even a barnacle-encrusted flask from 1785. Also displayed are anti-aircraft shell casings, and lots and lots of bullets.

"Why bullets?" Ritter was

asked.

"New York harbor was a munitions center, and bullets are everywhere on the ocean floor," he said. He suspects there was a lot of spillage in transferring munitions from the Owl's Head depot to New Jersey, and he believes the two-foot-long shell casing comes from the old battery in Sea Gate.

Ritter likes the fact that Mrs. Stahl's, a neighborhood fixture since opening in 1935, is sponsoring the exhibit. "This place has its own unique history. And they have great knishes, too,"

Ritter said.

Local historian Ron Schweiger gives frequent talks on Brooklyn history. He can be reached at 377-5527. Information on Gene Ritter's Professional Diving Archaeology is available at 454-1617.

Their displays at Mrs. Stahl's Knishes, at the corner of Coney Island and Brighton Beach avenues, can be seen daily from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and weekends from 9 a.m. to 7:45 p.m. Should you need to call ahead for knishes, the store's number is 648-0210.



Gene Ritter of Professional Diving Archaeology exhibits some of the many items he has collected. Photo by Tim Thomson