

Bklyn's 'Jacques Cousteau' Dives Into Bay

By Hope Reeves

The murky depths of Sheepshead Bay contain more than trash and pollution. And last week, about 15 feet below the surface, one man found something he's dying to share.

Gene Ritter, an archaeological diver, leapt off Pier 10, at Emmons Avenue and East 21st Street, in search of the bay's historical past and possibilities for its future. A mass of rubber and hoses, he emerged half an hour later with a handful of treasures and a few words of advice.

"It's absolutely amazing."

he exclaimed as he ripped off his helmet. "There's tons of bottles down there, *but*, it's relatively clean."

Ritter, who fed live audio and video via a camera attached to his helmet, broadcast his findings to a crowd gathered above. Oohing and ahing before the TV screen, the group moved through the near-freezing waters with him as he unearthed dozens of live oyster shells, old soda and beer bottles and a myriad of metal rods and beams.

"You can see these things are alive - so that's a good sign," echoed Ritter's tinny voice as the crowd watched his hand sift through dense mountains of silt. "Sheepshead Bay is abundant in life. It is not a desolate, polluted body of water."

Ritter later explained the significance of his findings. He said the dive will help Brooklynites understand their past while, at the same time, encourage them to create a bright future. He said he hoped the relative cleanliness of the bay would show residents mistakenly resigned to its contamination that "they shouldn't continue to pollute it."

One bystander admitted he was surprised by what he saw.

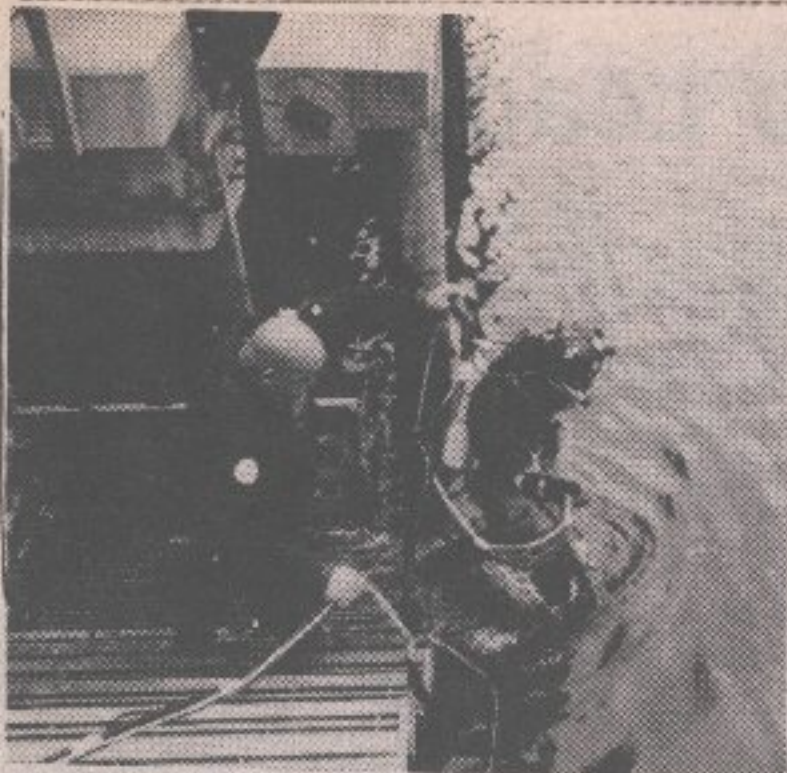
"I was expecting a lot of sludge and maybe a refrigerator or two," said 70-

year-old Joe Ratigan. "I was interested to see what he'd find and wouldn't have been surprised by just about anything."

Ritter made the dive, like dozens before it, with an army of equipment, including an ROV (Remote

Operated Vehicle). The camera-equipped ROV, which ventures around underwater on its own, can go places unsafe for human inspection and often finds things that would otherwise remain undiscovered.

Continued on next page



Ritter enters the water near Pier 10 in Sheepshead Bay.



Some of the many artifacts found by Professional Diving Archaeology in the ocean around Coney Island, Gravesend and other places around Brooklyn.



Diver Robert Wass shows Bruce Friedman a remote underwater camera device used to transmit images from the ocean floor.

Brooklyn's Jacques Cousteau

Continued from previous page

Bob Wass, a professional master dive instructor and a member of Ritter's team, said last week's dive was "just the beginning of everything." Future plans include expeditions to locate three historic treasure shipwrecks in the New York Harbor waterways and dives in Red Hook and other East River sites.

"The artifacts tell good stories," Ritter explained. "I've found messages in bottles and all sorts of things you don't normally read in the history books."

Other members of the team include Carol Toffals, Ritter's researcher and assistant and Tom Berg and Mike Carew, both diving instructors/commercial divers. Ritter explained the group teamed up in order to make good use of their collective talents, expertise and resources.

Ritter and his team have been sharing their findings with the New York public schools, using the hundreds of artifacts they find as a history lesson for students.

"What we do is shock kids," said Ritter. "We put on (wet) suits and space music, captivate their imagination and then begin to teach. We show 100-year-old Coca Cola bottles and take them back in time."

Ritter said his method seemed to excite the students and suggested the resulting interest might lead to further



Photo by Daniel Starling

Gene Ritter presents some of the bottles found underneath Pier 10 in Sheepshead Bay.

inquiry and learning at home.

Plans are underway for a documentary film series and footage from last week's Sheepshead Bay dive will air on "That's Brooklyn," sometime later this month. The show is broadcast Wednesdays at 7:30 p.m. on channel 34 (Time Warner) or channel 67 (Cablevision).

Looking as if he was about to walk on the moon, Ritter tried to quell obvious concern last week, saying he was well-protected underwater and, in fact, would probably be warmer than the group gathered on the pier.

"Actually," he chuckled through his helmet, "I'm really quite toasty."