

Brooklyn Library Hosts Coney Island Exhibit Til Sept. 30

By Louise Sweeney

In its heyday, Coney Island, N.Y., was the nation's foremost amusement park and was visited by millions of people a week. Today, only a few buildings remain.

Underwater, however, traces of those hordes of people have been found by divers — and placed on exhibit at the Brooklyn Library. Entitled "Over And Under," the exhibition runs through September and features items discovered above and below nearby waters.

Amateur archeologist Gene T. Ritter, of Brooklyn, assembled the collection of artifacts over about 10 years. His interest in archeology was sparked by finding a 2-foot-high, 50-calibre anti-aircraft shell from World War I. "It could have been adrift from batteries in Seagate," he speculates.

Ritter then discovered and documented two turn-of-the-century piers, Dreamland Pier and the original Steeplechase Pier from 1904, which eventually burned and was replaced by a smaller pier in 1954.

His artifacts include bottles dating from 1888 to 1960: milk bottles, beer mugs dropped from excursion ferries, a 1915 Coke bottle, Pepsi bottles from the 40s. An old photo shows German navy crews visiting the island; perhaps one of them dropped the 1847 Museum of Berlin medalion. A solid brass fishing reel is marked 1904. An early ferry passenger dropped an atomizer that once contained a cocaine solution to soothe a sore throat.

Other finds: jewelry, pennies and bottles with notes.

The exhibit combines these finds and underwater photos with vintage photos of Coney Island, bringing out the history of the colorful resort. Paul and Nancy Brigandi, Coney Island experts, provided the old pictures and research on the finds. Ritter's Professional Diving Archeology Company also includes photographers Joe Copleman and Lenny Speregen, Mike Feldbaum and Harold Andeson.

Ritter, who has been diving 19 years, always labeled any artifacts he found with the location, but now he does careful reconnaissance surveys, gridding and mapping exact locations of finds.

"We're trying to do professional archeological diving without having the state guide us," says Ritter who supplements his income by fishing for sea urchins in Maine.

"We have the historians and we have the divers. We're doing it the right way, sticking to New York State guidelines."

The objects he has found have no real value in themselves, except as history, he says. "Artifact removal is controversial, as you know, but the law says 'submerged objects' and these bottle are not submerged; they're on the sand."

No one has contested his right to the artifacts, though he says Howard Klein of American Sport Divers Association has offered legal help if needed.

Next, his group wants to investigate the East River and the Brooklyn shoreline, and old Fort Diamond under the Verrazano Bridge. He would like to develop a children's program about archeological diving, and to send his Coney Island exhibit on tour to other museums and libraries.

"We want to keep that rolling as much as we can and keep it alive," he says. "We'll put more history into it. The last thing I want to see is the state coming in and putting it in a basement." 