

Diver Down: He Searches for Treasure in Brooklyn's Muddy Depths

By Tamara Lindsay

A swimmer off Coney Island's shores would be surprised to learn there are more than just fishes in the sea below.

As professional diver and Bensonhurst resident Gene Ritter is aware, the water surrounding Brooklyn is rich with an untapped source of historical artifacts, from old soda bottles to Revolutionary War vessels.

Beginning as an amateur diver 20 years ago, Ritter has explored the waters surrounding Brooklyn and downtown Manhattan.

"There is such a cultural history underwater," said Ritter, who is the founder of the Professional Diving Archaeology Company (PDA).

Ritter said his interest was sparked in diving professionally following his discovery of a shell casing several years ago. "I was finding so many things, I needed to handle things properly," he said.

In the four years PDA has existed, Ritter and his crew have canvassed about a dozen sites along Brooklyn and Manhattan.

"I did not think New York had any underwater history," Ritter said. "It hits me when I find something."

He has found items ranging from a 30-year-old Seven-Up bottle to stripped cars to a warship from the 1700s.

Currently, PDA has secured more than 2,000 artifacts that are now housed in large fish tanks to allow for the sea-like atmosphere to remain.

"They don't have to be big. Even if it is broken glass... they must be classified," Ritter said.

Ritter's main discoveries are found in waters where piers once existed. According to Ritter, the water off Coney Island is particularly interesting because of the plethora of former piers. "We look at Coney Island as an historic site," he explained.

The importance of piers stems from the many artifacts tossed in the water from them. "Back then, most people were not aware of pollution," Ritter explained. "They thought once you throw it into the ocean, it was gone forever."

Little did the inhabitants of Coney Island realize that the items they discarded would one day become historic artifacts. Ritter credits the area's muddy waters. "Mud is a preservative. Artifacts will remain stationary because of it."

Treasure hunting, a relatively new experience for Ritter and PDA, is now on the agenda he was turned on to a 200-year-old British Revolutionary War vessel.

Ritter is now looking for the remnants of the *H.M.S. Hussar* that went down in the Hell Gate Channel in 1780. Rumored to have been carrying millions in gold, the *Hussar* has been the interest of many inquiries over the years.

Though some treasure hunters focus on financial windfalls, Ritter emphasized, "Gold is an incentive, but not the priority."

With the exploration of the *Hussar*, which is in the early stages, the PDA crew must go through many stages before ever getting into the water. The actual dive is the final stage.

Selection of a dive site begins the process, which is followed by extensive research into the history of the area and the surrounding water. "Gaining information is important," Ritter said.

Calling his diving gear "nontraditional," Ritter braves the water wearing a makeshift outfit of scuba gear and a hardhat with a light.

Ritter does most of

PDA's diving and must often face muddy water and zero visibility. "Most of my discoveries are made by bumping into things," he explained.

Ritter said his work as a diver and the artifacts he has accumulated over the years has fascinated many. "The [artifacts] brings people back to a time, or they are just amazed at holding something so old."

In addition to the response to his work, Ritter said the most gratifying aspect of being a diver is the solitude he finds underwater. "It is gratifying getting into the water... isolated from the rest of the world and just exploring."

Describing his work as "urban archaeology," Ritter explained, "Everybody has this concept that there is just junk out there... Junk could be something significant."

Though the state lists artifacts as being items that are 100 years old, Ritter said 20th century artifacts, which he describes as cultural products, are now valuable.

Other than exploring the *Hussar*, Ritter and his crew's future sites are Gravesend Bay, Narrows Bay and the East River.



In search of underwater treasures, Gene Ritter is all dressed up to face the mysteries of Brooklyn's bays.

Photo by Tamara Lindsay