

Divers Take the Plunge Into Coney Island's Past

By Merle English

STAFF WRITER

Diving professionally for 19 years, Bensonhurst resident Gene Ritter spends a lot of time underwater harvesting sea urchins for sale as a delicacy and making emergency repairs on pleasure craft.

His work usually takes him into the waters around New York City and off the coast of Maine. Five years ago, Ritter became bored "looking at fish" and began diving in the Atlantic Ocean near the Coney Island boardwalk in his spare time. A 50-cal., anti-aircraft shell he found near Steeplechase Pier in Coney Island sparked a new interest for him: recovering artifacts from the shorefront community's past.

"I was fascinated with it," Ritter, 32, said of his first find.

Beginning Tuesday, more than half of about 110 items Ritter picked up underwater — coins, bullets, medallions, beer mugs, soda and milk bottles dating back to the 1940s, the propeller of a ship, a century-old anchor and jewelry — will be displayed in an exhibition called, "Coney Island Over and Under," at the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza.

Notes in some bottles he found tell of the yearnings of a young man to meet someone to love and the wish of a young woman to attend college with her boyfriend and marry him and have children are among his finds.

Diving for bits and pieces of Coney Island has become more than a passing fancy for Ritter. In addition to some training in marine biology at John Dewey High School, he also took a course in marine archeology. In 1989, he founded and became president of a volunteer organization called Professional Diving Archeology Co. based in Bensonhurst. Underwater photographers Joe Coppelman of Sheepshead Bay, Lenny Speregen of Brooklyn Heights, and Milko Feldbaum of Canarsie, four divers and five boat owners are part of his team.

Most of the items Ritter and his crew brought to the surface were found near a submerged portion of what he believes is an old Steeplechase Pier that burned down. "We're trying to find out what historic value the pier has," he said.

Ritter said he also believes he has found part of another old pier that was near Dreamland, an amusement park that existed at the turn of the century when Coney Island was a resort. He learned through research that hundreds of people disembarked from ferries at both piers to enjoy themselves at the hotels and other attractions of the time.

His company has permission from the state Education Department to do a photographic survey of the pier sites, but Ritter fears government plans to build up the beach may destroy them.

"What we'd really like to see happen is the state declare the underwater piers a landmark or underwater park to protect the sites," he said. "The history of Coney Island is under these piers."

Photographs of the submerged pier sections will

be included in the library show.

Accompanying the exhibition will be a display of photographic and postcards of old Coney Island from a collection of more than 1,000 owned by Paul Brigandi, a Long Island resident who spent much of his life in Coney Island. Some of the artifacts Ritter found are linked to hotels and breweries memorialized in Brigandi's collection.

Because New York claims all artifacts found in state waters, Ritter said he is working with the National Shipwreck Alliance on Long Island to hammer out an agreement with the state Office of Government Service — which administers underwater lands in New York — and the State Museum, to enable him to keep some of the artifacts for educational use. "I'm hoping to get state cooperation so they won't take everything I found," he said.

Ritter's long range underwater exploration plans include dives under the Brooklyn Bridge, the Triborough Bridge, Ellis Island, and the South Street Seaport and Hell's Gate areas.

"There's quite a few good ships that went down with payroll," he remarked. "We're not just looking for gold. We want to show people what's there. We want to try to educate children and set up a children's program, show them what diving gear looks like and what marine archeology is about."

"Coney Island Over and Under" will be on the second floor balcony of the Brooklyn Public Library at Grand Army Plaza through Sept. 30. It will be on view Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. and on Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.



Gene Ritter, left, joins underwater photographers Joe Coppelman, center, and Lenny Speregen for a dive.

Newday / Donna Dietrich