

The Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge

By Kate Fox

Imagine the New York Harbor in 1929. The waters of the Hudson that flow between the shores of Manhattan and New Jersey--known as the North River--are crammed with dozens of ships receiving and unloading freight. It is the height of the lighterage era and tugboats chug through the river, pulling the covered barges, or lighters, used by railroad companies to send cargo beyond their New Jersey coast terminals. Bells, horns, and whistles blast, their soundings almost drowning out the shouts of the workers on the decks and on the piers who heave lumber, steel girders, and sacks of grain and coffee, from train cars to barges. Among these is Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge # 79, hauling nearly its full capacity of 450 tons of cargo, just a portion of the thousands of tons of cargo that will move through these waters in this year alone.

Almost 80 years later #79 is still working in the New York Harbor, though in a manner its original skippers likely never imagined. Since 1986, the former lighter has been known as the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge. Now docked at Pier 44 in Red Hook, Brooklyn, the barge is a vibrant red beacon amid gray warehouses. To get to the gangway, one must walk through a garden of wild flowers. On board, a crew of five or six works is present almost every day, constantly sanding, sawing, re-sealing and generally keeping the barge in shape.

The single room under the cover, nearly 30 feet wide by 90 feet long, fills with sunlight that pours in through four massive sliding doors, now half open. Where eight decades ago one would have seen stacks of crates, boxes, burlap sacks and planks of

wood there is a heavy velvet theatrical curtain, four dozen chairs for an audience, and a hodge-podge of harbor-life detritus like propeller fins, locks, rudders, and woven nets.

The walls are covered with wooden signs from the harbor of the past: Blue Line, Rockland County, New York Central No. 26, J. Smith Harbor Shifting Corp., Standard Crane & Derrick. Framed images and explanatory placards are squeezed in between these, the beginnings of the next exhibit to open--a history of the American showboat curated in cooperation with the Theatre Museum. Above, the ceiling is completely covered with tools of the lighterage trade: ice-tong shaped pincers for carrying lumber, fierce hook grips for grabbing crates and soft packages, canvas water buckets, wooden shovels, and toothless rakes.

One of the very last of its kind on the water (it has a place on the National Register of Historic Places), Barge #79 managed to survive the mid-20th century replacement of lighters with container ships--and the demise of the Lehigh Valley Railroad in the 1970s--only to nearly molder away in the mudflats below the George Washington Bridge, apparently useless. That's where David Sharps, the Museum Director, found it; half-sunk in the shallows off of Edgewater, New Jersey, the barge was owned by a pile-driver who happily sold the wooden antiquity to Sharps in 1985 for \$500.

Sharps, however, saw a great future for the barge. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the native of Maryland's mountainous west had made a career for himself as a juggler and performer on various cruise lines. During his travels around the world, he stopped in Paris, where he studied at the renowned Ecole International de Theatre Jacques Lecoq. While in Paris, he happened to get a gig as a caretaker of a river barge.

Almost immediately, Sharps was hooked to life on the river and upon his return to the United States, it seemed more than a little serendipitous when he heard about a crumbling Hudson River railroad barge that was up for sale. Here was an opportunity to combine his love of performing with a life on the water: he would make the barge a museum by day and a showboat by night.

Before any performances could be held, before any art work could be exhibited, and before any school groups could come aboard to learn about the history of the New York Harbor, Sharps needed to make the barge float. He was determined to keep #79 on the very river that had provided for its first livelihood. After two years of pumping 300 tons of Hudson mud from the hull, Sharps began moving the barge with the help of tugboats (the barge does not have an engine). Occasionally docking in Jersey City, Hoboken and the South Street Seaport, he moved the barge, refurbishing it with the help of friends and people he met along the way who shared his interest in making a piece of New York's past a working part of its present.

"I've always liked things that had a lot of history," Sharps says as he runs a hand along one of the sturdy, five-inch-thick beams in the barge cover's frame. It is smooth to the touch after the years of exposure since the barge was built in Perth Amboy in 1914; well over fifty percent of the original structure remains in the barge. Sharps and his crew are on a mission to bring #79 back to the working condition and appearance it would have had during its earliest years.

Sharps readily points to the comfortable home dock at Pier 44 in Red Hook as central to the barge's rehabilitation and the museum's continued success. In turn, the museum has been equally important to the development and accessibility of Red Hook's

waterfront. Around the same time that Sharps bought his barge, a local developer named Greg O'Connell purchased three pre-Civil War era warehouses that sat by Pier 44 from the Port Authority of New York. In 1994, O'Connell offered docking space to the Waterfront Museum in the hope that the museum would be part of a plan to revive a neighborhood that had once been so dominant in the New York maritime industry.

It has been suggested that the practice of lighterage really began with the arrival, in 1610, of the first Dutch cargo to the waters surrounding Manhattan. True or not, Red Hook, settled by the Dutch just a few decades later, thrived as a center of water dependent industry, transforming from farmland to one of the most modern waterfronts of the late 19th century. The Erie Basin, Atlantic Docks, and the Gowanus Canal were features of a shipping infrastructure that supported the economic well-being of Red Hook until the shift to container-based shipping and trucking after World War II. Since Red Hook lacked the space required to build the large lots needed to hold the containers, companies increasingly moved operations to the New Jersey side of the harbor, which also boasted more direct access to railroads and national highways. Construction of the Gowanus Expressway and the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, in addition to a lack of subway access, isolated the neighborhood from the rest of Brooklyn. The population declined sharply. There was little new construction apart from public housing. Public access to the waterfront was cut off at nearly every point.

By the 1980s, Red Hook was a shadow of its former self. "The waterfront here was very different 21 years ago than it is today," says Sharps. Even when he brought Barge #79 to dock by Pier 44 in 1994, cyclone fencing and packs of wild dogs deterred visitors from making their way down to the museum. Sharps continually points to the

generosity and vision of Greg O'Connell and the confidence of the museum's board of directors to explain why he and his family (who are officially the owners and caretakers of the barge) are determined to be part of the progress that marks the rebirth of Red Hook. The garden built around the pier and the walkway that juts out into the water next to the barge are open to the public every day from dawn until dusk. With an unobstructed view of the Statue of Liberty, it's hard to imagine a better place to learn more about New York's maritime past.

Of course, progress hasn't been without pitfalls. "I'm slowly starting to understand why not too many people buy old barges," Sharps says. In 1998, #79 started leaking. Though Sharps and the board have received several grants over the years to restore the barge and support the museum's many exhibits and programs, a lack of funds left the cause of leakage undetermined and the problem unsolved until 2001, when it was discovered the shipworms had eaten through the bottom of the barge. Ironically, the decrease of pollution after the shipping industry left New York Harbor made the waters a friendly habitat for two species in particular, the gribble and the teredo. Barge #79 was tugged up above Albany, New York, where it remained in dry dock for 100 days. The bottom of the barge was completely replaced using traditional materials of tar and oakum (jute)-based caulk. However, a 21st century precaution was taken and the entire bottom was also covered with an impervious plastic sheath. The Coast Guard routinely inspects the barge to ensure that it is sound and can continue to welcome the nearly 10,000 visitors who walk up its gangway each year.

Sharps believes the museum has and continues to meet its goal of bringing more and new people to Red Hook's waterfront. But he also believes there is much more work

to do: "The entire New York Harbor is in need of a makeover. We're relying on old piers, some built in the 1860s. So much of the infrastructure has been left unused for so long." A long-term plan aspires to create docks for historic and educational purposes in places like Hudson River Park and Governors Island Park, the thought being that the museum will be able to travel to these various docks and expose different neighborhoods to their shared maritime legacy. Such a plan may take many years to ever come to fruition, but Sharps is undeterred. As he says about the process of transforming an abandoned piece of railroad hardware into a vital part of Brooklyn's waterfront, "If something is really a good idea, it may take a lifetime to complete."

Please visit www.waterfrontmuseum.org for information about visiting The Waterfront Museum & Showboat Barge.

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