

HARD ROCKS AND HARD HATS IN BROWNSTONE QUARRY PARK, CT

by Janice Raber



Portland's Brownstone Quarry

What do the Brownstone Quarry Park in Portland, Connecticut and the Mark V diving helmet have in common? They are both old. What do they have to do with each other? They are ideally compatible.

The Brownstone Quarry, a facility for scuba divers and other outdoor activities recently hosted a group of people that enjoy diving in refurbished, vintage equipment, and it proved to be a terrific experience for both the owners of the quarry and the divers.

The quarry is a newly opened water park of sorts that is still under development, but is completely operational right now. Located about an hour NE from the Bridgeport Ferry Terminal, it is perfectly designed for scuba training and just plain recreational diving and exploration. Bob Rusnak and Wayne Collins, members of the Historical Diving Society and the Northeast Diving Equipment Group, two enthusiasts for vintage diving equipment, stumbled upon the quarry during a vacation. They recognized right away that it would be a wonderful place to hold a dive rally, with features like a ramp for easy walk-in water entry and good, clear underwater visibility. The owners/operators, three brothers, Ed, Frank and Sean Hayes, and partner John Gremegna agreed and the rest, as they say, is history.

The whole place itself is history actually, because the beautiful brownstone mined from this quarry was popular for building during the 1980's and early 1900's and was used in constructing brownstone apartments in Manhattan, Boston and Brooklyn. At one time the quarry employed 2,000 men and used 500 oxen to mine the stone. Perfectly shaped slabs of stone were taken by locomotive to the schooners on the Connecticut River for transport to New York City. The quarry stopped operating in

1938 after being flooded when the river overflowed during a storm. It is interesting that about a decade before, during the 1920's according to Bob Rusnak, the Mark V dive helmet and canvas suit was standard-issue military diving equipment. This is the type of gear that was probably used to build some of the bridges around Manhattan.

Today the quarry is a scenic 27-acre park surrounded by towering brownstone cliffs, some ninety feet high. The water depth is about 85 feet, with water temperatures approaching the mid-70's in the summer, up to about 30 feet where the thermocline kicks in. Being spring-fed, it gets down to a cool average somewhere in the 40-degree range on the bottom. Visibility varies from ten to thirty feet, and there are plenty of fish.

Large-mouth bass are abundant, as well as carp, bluegills, perch and American eels, which may not be the most attractive specimen you will encounter but they won't harm you. Owner Ed Hayes talks of monster catfish, 4-to-5 feet long and 7-to 8-pound bass. Some fishing is permitted, but the park practices the principle of catch and release. Ed said night diving was spectacular in early June when the fish were spawning and there were nests everywhere. An old railway road bed connects the beach area to a peninsula on the far side of the quarry. Its depth runs from 5-to-fifty feet, and it is loaded with spawning fish that never leave their nests, a perfect photographic opportunity.

To make the park attractive for divers, underwater 15-by-15-foot platforms are anchored at different depths throughout the quarry from 10 feet down to 55 feet, and there are lines connecting them for easy navigation, an ideal arrangement for instructors to review skills with

students. A couple of sunken boats are available for exploration and for the adventurous, one wall still has a pile of abandoned cars stacked up against it at about a 50-foot depth, remnants from when it was still an abandoned quarry. "Anything that could be dumped was dumped in here from 1939 on," said Frank Hayes, explaining what they went through to clean up the place. "We pulled out 8 motorcycles, 4 cars, Pepsi machines, 16 air conditioners, pistols, rifles, diamond and gold rings, you name it. About 40 tons of garbage from the bottom was taken out with help from the volunteers we have on staff and we had a ball doing it. Everybody thinks it was like a treasure hunt."

The quarry staff were excellent hosts, giving the vintage divers full access to the beach area



Kayaks in the foreground, beautiful brownstone walls in the back.

to set up the equipment needed in preparation for the day's events. The communications box was set up on an available dock and tents were erected to provide shade. The noisy, but necessary, air compressor was set back where it would be least distracting, and picnic tables and benches were nearby for use by all. Divers from New Jersey, New York, Long Island, Massachusetts, and even Maine came specifically to have a try at diving in the old-fashioned suits and take advantage of exploring this new underwater park with their own scuba equipment. Over the three-day period about 40 divers were dressed in various types of hard-hat gear, including the famous Mark V, as well as a Russian helmet, a Chinese helmet, a more modern Superlite and even a gas mask that had been converted by the men at Pearl Harbor, an invention born out of necessity used while attempting to help rescue sailors trapped in wreckage after the attack on December 7, 1941.

Lest you think that this opportunity to dive in the heavy gear was attractive only to macho men, there were several women who successfully

endured the 30 to 40 minutes it takes to suit up a diver properly, including tying up the 17-pound shoes, strapping on the 85-pound leather and lead weight belt and bolting the helmet to the breast plate, adding another 50 or so pounds to the package.

All participants had the opportunity to help dress a diver and tend the surface supply hoses before trying the outfit on for themselves, which gave them a better

understanding of exactly what was going to be happening when it was their turn. Voice communication from surface to diver was maintained at all times thanks to Gene and Beth Ritter from the Cultural Research Divers in Brooklyn.



John Chominsky smiles before the face plate is closed and locked. After that he will breath surface supplied air from the compressor and be walked into the water.



Wayne Collins wearing World War II Gas Mask converted to surface supplied dive mask.



Two of the various helmets that divers got to try. Left is a Russian Helmet, right is a Chinese Helmet

continued on page 24

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continued from page 22

Experienced hard-hat divers from the Northeast Diving Equipment Group, the Long Island Divers Association, the Scuba Sports Club, Eco-Photo Explorers and the Island Polar Bears in NY were on hand to assist and to act as safety divers guiding those in the heavy gear.

All in all, the event can be counted as a resounding success for everyone! George Bouloukos, originally from Australia, summed it up saying, "I've dived everywhere all over the world and the best dive that I've ever had was in the Mark V. It is wonderful that they collect it (the equipment), but they are maintaining it. Being able to dive in it is just unreal. Walking around down there...I've dived the quarry here hundreds of times, but that was really good." George lives in New Jersey and comes up here to teach on the weekends.

In the waning afternoon, those who remained for the entire weekend had ample op-



Wayne Collins walking a diver wearing the Mark V into the water

portunity to try out other attractions available in the park.

Two types of enormous adult-sized inflatable balloon type "water toys" that included a slide and a trampoline with a catapult effect were great fun for overgrown kids. A leisure kayak ride around the perimeter was a relaxing respite from the hectic day. The setting sun beamed slivers of light through the trees, making interesting odd shadows on the jutting angles of the quarry walls.

There are plans to install two zip lines that will send its riders from a sixty-foot height on a thrilling descent ending with a splash. On the far side near a picturesque peninsula,

there will be rock climbing right up the natural brownstone walls. They will soon open a campground adjacent to the quarry and eventually have hiking trails, mountain biking and challenge courses for team and camp events, much like the survivor program. The Hayes brothers have many more innovative ideas with the ultimate vision being to create a Huckle-

berry Finn-outdoor-type of theme park without the noise and commercialism found in some other water parks. Judging by what they have accomplished in the past two years, they will quickly attain their goals for Brownstone Quarry Park.

And certainly the divers with the old hard hats will return to see what is new!

For information on the Brown Quarry Park, visit their web site at www.brownstonepark.com.

For information on the Northeast Diving Equipment Group, e-mail Bob Rusnak at vin-diver@yahoo.com.



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