

Dreamland Bell Recovered

and Ringing Again in Coney Island *By Janice Raber*

Many of you might recall hearing the phrase "this place is lit up like Luna Park" from admonishing grandparents urging you to conserve electricity and put out the lights. Some might even know that Luna Park was one of three great amusement parks, the others being Steeplechase and Dreamland, located in Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York. They were filled with exhibits, entertainment, food stands and thrilling rides and roller coasters. And, yes, they were illuminated by thousands and thousands of bright, colorful lights. The attractions lined the boardwalk and wooden piers jutting out precariously over the splashing waves of the Atlantic Ocean.

Always in competition with each other, Dreamland was busily preparing for the season's opening day in May, 1911, when exploding light bulbs in a concession called Hell Gate led to a series of events that accidentally caused a fire...and well, all hell broke loose.

The blaze spread rapidly among the wooden-framed, plaster of Paris-covered buildings and raged on for 18 hours due to a failure in the new high-pressure water pumping station. The 1,200-foot long "New Iron Pier" that had been rebuilt in 1881 collapsed amid the engulfing flames and the 500-pound brass bell that once heralded the arrival of guests by steamboat crashed into the sea. Left in its wake was complete destruction and acres of



Coney Island's Dreamland bell discovered offshore in 2008 returning a piece of history to it's rightful place.

smoldering rubble.

Captain Gene Ritter, a commercial diver and member of The Cultural Research Divers knew all about the bell and its history, but assumed it had sunk deep into the muck and debris over the years. The Cultural Research Diver's Mission is focused on Marine Environment Education and the preservation of New York State's rich marine heritage. Ritter, a lifetime resident of Coney Island in Brook-

lyn, NY has devoted over 20 years towards the goals of this never-ending, ongoing project and he dreamed of finding this bell, no matter the odds. He and his buddy, Louie Scarcella, began a search.

Thanks to his dream and diving expertise, he and his team have returned this icon of Coney Island's colorful amusement park history back to daylight after its untimely disappearance almost 100 years ago.

"We discovered the bell on November 4th of 2008 about 100 yards offshore in just 25 feet of water," Ritter said. He assembled a team of divers as well as topside support and began preparations for recovery. Almost a year later, with the help of grants, donations, good friends and good weather conditions the bell was brought to the surface. The Superlite Model 27 and Model 37 dive helmets Ritter wore and the underwater communications equipment was provided Connie Morgan, owner by

Kirby Morgan Dive Systems. "We raised the quarter-ton bell using a 200 lb lift bag," explained Ritter. Then using straps and shackles, Ritter wriggled the bell free from the clutches of 100 years of mud and muck and walked it across the ocean floor to a ten-foot cargo net of polyline. Once it was secured and shackled in the net, they rigged it with a "2,000

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lb pillow lift bag.” “Towboat US towed us to the Gateway Marina in Brooklyn by Floyd Bennett Field,” explained Ritter. Two days later they brought the bell on a truck and delivered it with a fork lift to the History Project Museum and Shop operated by Charlie Densen and curator, Tricia Vita, where it was readied for display on September 5, 2009. The Museum is located in the shadows of the famous Coney Island Roller Coaster.

“This is just a wonderful day,” Ritter said with

a smile as wide as the Brooklyn Bridge! “The outpouring of support from the media is just phenomenal. It made every newspaper in the country!”

The three-foot-high bell stood proudly, mounted on a sturdy frame over a large tub where it was constantly kept awash with fresh water to maintain preservation. Portions of the metal is tinged with green from years in the sea, but the name James Gregory, New York, 1885, boldly inscribed on its side, can be easily read. Gregory was the foundry owner who cast the bell. With great fanfare, accompanied by the applause of local admirers, Ritter rang the bell for the first time back on Coney Island ground. It rang true and clear, affirming its return home, giving hope and encouragement to those who continue to work on restoration and The History Project. “It has a new life. It’s a new life for Coney Island, it’s a symbol of Coney Island and it belongs in Coney Island!” exclaimed Ritter.

Ritter says it is fitting that a diver recovered the bell and plays a part in the continuing history of Coney Island because two divers had originally set up an amusement park prior to the building of Luna Park, Steeplechase and Dreamland.



The Dreamland Bell on display.

In his research he learned that a gentleman named Louis Sorcho, a commercial salvage diver who used a Morse hard hat had set a record back in the 1880’s for staying in the water almost nine hours, was one of these entrepreneurs. The other gentleman was Paul Boynton, who set a record for long distance swimming using a dry suit, maybe the first-ever dry suit, and who was recognized for his bravery during the Spanish American War. Their endeavor was called Sealion Park. “So it was the diver’s who created the interest in Coney Island first,” explains Ritter. “That was 100 years ago and here we are today,

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Gene Ritter holding one of the helmets he used in the bell recovery.

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