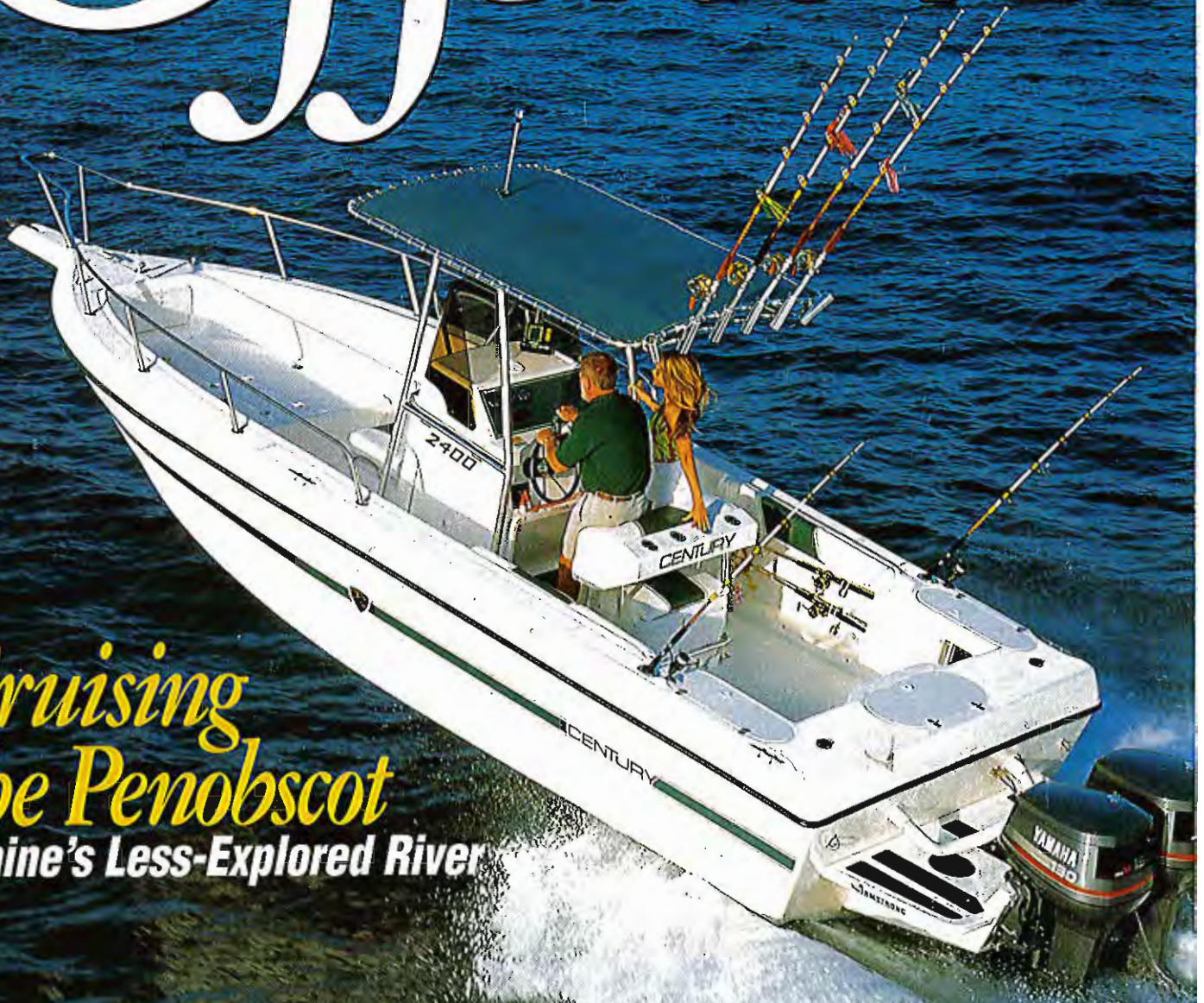


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Barge Magic



Fifty years ago, Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79 carried cargo across New York Harbor. Now it brings new life to the harbor with museum exhibits, concerts and circus performances.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY CAROLINA SALGUERO

It is Sunday afternoon in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and a crowd is gathering on the waterfront—mothers pushing strollers, cyclists pedaling along an old pier, young couples walking hand-in-hand, and paddlers and powerboaters arriving by water. The magnet is an old railroad barge turned museum and showboat, and the audience has come to watch acrobats, jugglers and slack-rope walkers perform against the backdrop of New York Harbor. The Statue of Liberty, the Verrazano Narrows Bridge and the Lower Manhattan skyline are all visible through the barn-red barge's open cargo doors.

"It's an amazing scene," says David Sharps, the forty-something man who salvaged the barge and now produces shows there. Indeed it is, particularly if you know

anything about the history of the New York waterfront. In its heyday during the 1940s and '50s, Red Hook was a busy port with the kind of tough, working-waterfront community that Elia Kazan portrayed in his classic film *On the Waterfront*. At the same time, Sharps's barge, *Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79*, was carrying cargo from ships to railroad transfer stations on the other side of New York Harbor.

How the barge came to be a museum and performance space on this rusty Brooklyn peninsula is a tale involving clowns, cruise ships, Paris—and mud, lots of mud.

Sharps is a "new vaudevillian"—a juggler, fire-eater and unicyclist—who grew up in the Appalachian Mountains and later studied clowning under a French mas-

ter. Strangely, his work led him to the water. Sharps's love of the ocean began in 1978 when, at 21, he signed on to be a juggler on Carnival Cruise Line ships. After four years at sea, he won a scholarship to study in Paris with Jacques Lecoq, the famed French mime and movement teacher. As a student, he lived on a barge on the Seine. Not surprisingly, the water beckoned when he returned home. "I was looking for something that would keep me from traveling and still allow me to keep aspects of my travels—the entertainment and history, the love of old things and the excitement of bringing something out of an actual moment," he says.

At about this time, he heard about a partially submerged railroad barge just south of the George Washington Bridge





on the Hudson River in Edgewater, New Jersey. He gave the barge a low-tech survey, groping around the sunken thing. “I could feel the edges were square, so I figured what was below the waterline was in good shape,” he says. And so, in 1985, he bought the barge for \$500.

The problem was the 30-foot by 90-foot wooden barge was full of mud—about 300 tons of it. But Sharps is as robust as he is optimistic, and after two years of hard labor, the barge floated. “As I went further, I realized no one had restored one of these. That

Top left: Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79 at her berth on the Brooklyn waterfront.

Top: Old wooden blocks hang from beams inside the barge.

Right: Bargeman David Sharps.



Waterfront Waypoints

Barge Magic

gave me a fun mission," he says. Built in 1914 in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, *Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79*, was a lighter—one of several vessels that crisscrossed the then-busy harbor, carrying cargo from ships to railroad terminals for transport to other parts of the country. Lighters thrived from about 1860 until the 1960s, when container shipping made them obsolete. *Barge #79* retired as a coffee barge around 1960. Eventually, it came to rest on the New Jersey mud flats, destined, until Sharps came along, to end its life as firewood.

Once the barge was afloat, Sharps and other tug and barge enthusiasts decided to turn it into a museum. They formed a non-profit corporation, named the barge the Hudson Waterfront Museum, found dock space in Hoboken, New Jersey, and invited the public to come aboard for arts and education programs. Sharps, it seemed, had a success on his hands.

Not so fast, though. Politics proved stickier than mud and forced the barge to keep moving for the next five years as it ran



Sharps (wearing the white shirt) picnics with family and friends on the pier beside the barge.

ahead of the gentrification wave. "We were orphans," Sharps recalls. In 1994, *Barge #79* found its way to Red Hook, when Sharps got a tip that an ex-cop named Greg O'Connell, who owned some Civil-War-era warehouses on stone wharves in Red Hook, might have space for the barge.


O'Connell envisioned a mixed-use waterfront with small businesses and arts organizations sharing his wharves, and Sharps's museum barge seemed like an ideal fit. Sharps says his move to Red Hook has been a godsend. "I feel I am part of a waterfront access plan. I feel like

I have a real future here. When I lost the pressure of having to find a home, I was able to put my energies into programs."

And the programs are many. A decade after it sat in the mud, the barge, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, hosts 4,000 to 5,000 visitors a year. For the last five years, it has offered circus performances in June, a sunset concert series in July and August, and school-group tours throughout the year. About 40 groups visited last year, says Sharps, who regales the youngsters with wonderful stories about the barge, the old port and marine ecology. ➤

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Waterfront Waypoints Barge Magic

"I think of myself as more of an educator than a performer now," he says. Nevertheless, he always treats the school groups to a little clowning and juggling—to introduce them to the showboat tradition. "Most people think of showboats as paddle-wheelers," Sharps says. "But that's Hollywood. Real showboats were barges like this one." After seven years in Red Hook, the barge has become a respected institution. In 1998, the United Nations designated it as "Regional Craft of the International Year of Oceans," for its success in bringing people to the waterfront. In the words of *Time-Out New York*, it is "a cultural center that has become a neighborhood hub."

But now the museum barge faces a new crisis: Worms are eating the ship. Thanks to cleaner waters, wood-eating marine borers have returned to New York Harbor and are feasting on piers, pilings and wooden vessels. Unless the 88-year-old barge can be repaired and sealed with protective paints and vinyl sheathing against further worm damage, Sharps says it may not last two more seasons.

But after all the effort he put into saving the barge, Sharps is not about to let that happen. He has embarked on a major effort to raise the \$263,000 needed to haul the barge and to hire a team of professional shipwrights to repair the vessel. So far, he has raised \$60,000 in cash and has secured a large in-kind contribution from the New York State Canal Corporation, which will donate use of its dry dock upstate in Waterford, New York. There is still a long way to go, but Sharps, ever the optimist, is convinced that the barge will be on its way to Waterford in May. The repair project—which will be documented on video for later showing at the museum—should take about three months, and by September, the barge should be back at its berth in Red Hook, ready to continue its education and entertainment programs. ■

For more information about Lehigh Valley Railroad Barge #79 and its programs and preservation project, visit www.waterfrontmuseum.org.

Offshore contributor Carolina Salguero lives in Red Hook and is a frequent visitor to the historic barge.

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