

# American Heritage

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## A LIFE ON THE WATERFRONT

There's no place like home—especially if it's an ancient railway barge

AT THE RED HOOK END OF the waterfront, David Sharps has seen the death and slow rebirth of Brooklyn's waterfront firsthand from his railroad barge and waterfront museum. His floating museum—a lovingly restored 91-year-old lighter—is currently moored at the mouth of Red Hook's Erie Basin, an area once, as the 1939 *WPA Guide to New York City* put it, the “busiest shipping center in the country.” Sharps lives on his 1914 barge with his wife, his daughter, and a rabbit, an image of eccentric picturesqueness to many in the neighborhood these days, but according to the WPA writers, there were once “nearly three hundred barge families, travelers on the Erie and Champlain canals for dozens of years,” who wintered annually nearby at the State Barge Canal Terminal. Sharps came to his love of maritime history while working cruise ships as a clown and juggler in the early 1980s. In Paris he studied

while living on the Seine; returning to America, he tried living similarly on barges in New York Harbor, which was then at its abandoned, polluted nadir. Sharps bought a half-sunken railway barge in 1985 for one dollar and pumped 300 tons of harbor sludge out of its hull. Then the real work began with caulking the sides and replacing many of the long,



The resurrected railroad barge.

yellow-leaf-pine timbers. The 30-by-90-foot Lehigh Valley Railroad barge number 79 is the last of its kind from what's called the Lighterage Era, when these vessels moved materials across the harbor. The barge still bears jocular graffiti from a long-ago crew: “All Swedes use funnels instead of shot glasses.”

When you visit him today, Sharps is not your mental picture of the director of a National Historical Landmark registered museum; he is a mechanic, carpenter, roofer, and, when everything else is taken care of, historian and clown whose presentations educate Brooklyn schoolchildren about the history (and resurgent life) of their waterfront. Standing shirtless

on the rear of the barge one bright summer morning last year, he watched crabs mate on the surface and jellyfish bloom from the bottom, evidence of the astonishing improvement in the water quality of the Hudson

that has also brought a return of shipworms, hastening the rot of old Brooklyn piers like his museum's former home, which collapsed while the barge was recently in dry dock. He has since raised half a million dollars to refit the barge and build it a new homeport with a magnificent view of the Statue of Liberty.—N.W.