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RED HOOK FLATS

There was one particular place that we would like to sell our junk and that was when we stopped at Red Hook Flats in New York harbor. This was the biggest harbor that we ever visited. More happened while at this port than in all of the other ports together, as far as I was concerned. We would go ashore there if we dared, watch some of the grandest ships ever coming and going, look at the scenery and even swim from the barge. The Statue of Liberty stood high in the sky and looked over us the whole time we would be there. Her lighted torch left a considerable impression on many servicemen as they left that port with so much doubt that they may never see her again. It also gave a better feeling when you looked at her on your return. This port was also a holding place for the larger seagoing ships to gather while waiting to be placed in a convoy to go overseas. It would not be unusual to have more than a hundred ships as well as twenty or thirty barges there all at once. For some reason the tugs would bring the barges close up to the Brooklyn side of Red Hook Flats and have them anchor there. The larger ships would anchor further back toward the narrows or closer to sea. When the tug turned us loose, it's captain would give the signal to let go anchor, but dad always let the barge drift as close to the channel as he could so it would be easier when we tried to row ashore with the skiff. Now and then we were able to tie up alongside of another barge and we would have some company. We looked forward to this especially if the other barge had some family on it. Mom would have another woman to talk with and once in a while there would be another kid aboard and we would have some company.

There was one particular junk man that catered to the barges. We simply called him "Joe". You could always hear him coming for a ways away. His old boat had a familiar putt-putt to the sound and he moved slowly coming from astern alongside. He would always holler "hey use guys, got any junk?" We had his answer, a great big loud "yes". We would drop him a line to tie up with at the ladder and he would come aboard and look at our stash. He always remembered us and would just haw around grunting and mumbling. He would say "you don't have much this time, what happened?" He would be messing with our minds. Whatever he first offered, we would just howl and say "man, that ain't much, you got to do better". He would. Once we settled on a price, he would reach down in his jeans and pull a wad of money and peel off some and give it to dad. Ole Joe would laugh and say, "You got me again". We

made all the spending money we needed and some, from that junk. It was not only fun scavenging but paid for all of our souvenirs we would take home to give to our friends.

There were water taxis that catered to the larger ships. They made scheduled runs to various place ashore to pick up and drop off the crewmembers from the ships anchored in the Flats. If the barges wanted to get one of the taxis they would signal by hoisting the American flag up the forward mast and a taxi would come by and pick up the crewmember and take them ashore. Dad would only use it if he was planning to go ashore by himself and had business with the company. Most of the time, we would put the skiff over the side and row over to Erie Basin in Brooklyn and tie up. I remember seeing one particular skipped of a barge when he went ashore. He would dress in his captain's uniform and have one of the crew row him ashore. The next day one of the crew had to go back ashore and bring him back. I probably say this happen about five or six times during my whole career on those barges. The greatest majority of the barge people didn't put on too many airs. Uniforms were for others and we mostly wore dungarees. When we went ashore we may have on a pair of kakis and a collared shirt. If Dad had to dress up he would put on a suit and tie. He did believe in being neat when he went ashore, but not to the excess of a uniform.

We got our groceries and other supplies from Roulston's ship's store at 359 Van Brunt Street near Dykeman Street in Brooklyn over by the basin. The owner always had some whiskey in the back room for the captains to drink while they waited for their orders to be filled. They took their time to fill those orders always hoping the captains would buy more supplies. They would always step into the back room to alert the captains of some new which-a-my-call. Sometimes it worked. After we would leave Roulston's dad would have pretty much of a load but there was one more stop to be made. There was a bar just a block down the street and we would always stop there for him to have a couple more. Now he was sure to be loaded. We would a carry the grub down to the docks by way of a cart that belonged to Roulston's and load the skiff. Somewhere at the docks there was an ice plant that we would pick up a block of ice. A block of ice weighs three hundred pounds alone. These skiffs would only have about fifteen inches of freeboard when empty. When loaded with two people and supplies, you may be lucky to have seven inches left. That was okay in calm waters and only about three or four miles to row. We first had to get out of Erie Basin. This basin was used as a drop off for various companies that used scows to carry railroad cars from one destination to another. They would be bunched in there any way the tugs could put them there. These scows had a protruding bow that would allow for a good distance between two if they were head to head. That was supposed to be how they were to be in there, but not always. If they were placed alongside each other, there would be no room to get between them. A person could

lean against one of the scows and their weight would allow them to separate unless there was a tug in there somewhere trying to move them around to get access an another one. We would attempt this gauntlet, moving one and pushing on another. Then slipping between couples of bows and then starting the process all over again until we reached the edge of the channel.

Now the fun began. The speed of the tides in that channel was tremendous and it was all two people could do to row that loaded skiff out to the barge. Double rowing is an art and you acquire that art by rowing with your partner over and over again. We boys hardly ever came ashore together with dad. Usually one or the other would stay aboard with mom and watch over things, especially if the barge was loaded. There was too much of a chance the barge would spring a leak and take on too much water to be left alone for too long. So, one of us would be there with dad, pulling on two oars in tandem with him. He wasn't a big man but he knew how to take advantage of the oars in a rough sea.

Before we would leave the barge, dad would estimate our time ashore and time at the stores to take advantage of the tides. We would always go in on a near slack tide outgoing. We would have about six hours of incoming tide and then another slack tide. He would plan to catch that tide to keep from bucking that tremendous current that ran in those channels. If we were to get caught up in a strong current with a heavy load aboard, it was a chance we may get swept out to sea. This was bad enough, but we had to take on every tug that was in the harbor. When those babies came down upon you and you were trying to cross their bow, they carried a mighty big bone in their mouth and that transformed into very big waves. If the waves caught you sideways they could capsize you or at the very least they would fill the boat with water and ruin the supplies. You had to be quick and move either the bow or the stern toward the wave and ride it out. This would always cause you to be sideways to the tide and you had to get back with the cross current to get pass the channel and onto the flats. This was tricky and really gave you a work out. More than once we could see the guys of the tugs just laughing at us. More than once I wished we could have switched places with them so they could get the other end of the stick. By the time we got to the boat Dad would have sobered up and all that money was wasted on his having "just a few"?

My favorite was candy Clark bars and chicken salad sandwiches. But before I could enjoy them we had to get this stuff up on the barge and load them in their respective places. By the time we got to the barge the two pieces of ice would have melted down quite a bit. They were hoisted aboard first and with the icebox having been cleaned by whomever was left onboard, was placed in the bottom and ready to receive the perishables. Up in the area of New York, there was a soda drink called "Spur" that we were all partial too. We would get a case of

that ashore and it would be divided between us. These drinks became quite a concern on who had how many left after a couple of days had gone by. We were always trying to find places to hide them from each other in the icebox. Someone always made out by getting more than their share and those drinks were never divided to be shared.

These barges had two types of transportation that was used to get us ashore. We always had a square end skiff while others had dories. These dories were double ended and had much more freeboard. The dory took the sea much better than the skiff and that made it more seaworthy when coming back aboard with a load of groceries. When looking at one from a distance one would really notice the difference in their handling. For some reason, dad would say those that used the dory were more from another country and brought that tradition with them when they came over here. I know the ones that I would see were mostly "Swedes" and I truly believed they were the better seaman as they handled these dories with the greatest of ease. It was a pleasure seeing those guys moving about up there at Red Hook Flats.

We rarely had any time to sight see at any place we visited. New York was our most visited port and our most visited city along with the various boroughs. Dad took us to Coney Island only one time, but I still remember it quite clearly. He bought me a beanie hat that had four luminous stripes on it. They really glowed under fluorescent lighting. I still have picture of that hat with my brother having his arm around me. The picture is a rare display of affection between us, as we were known more for fighting and arguing. On that same trip, Dad took us to see Times Square. That was the brightest and most dazzling display of lights that I had ever seen. We were treated to a hot dog and a root beer. I can still taste that root beer. The people were all around us. I remember that dad made a remark about them. He said, "Look at them; they are going this way and that way and don't know which way to go, but in a hell of a hurry to get there".