

Rip Hayman recalls a waterfront of pungent smells, nightly bonfires and grizzled longshoremen.

River's Edge

Capt. Rip Hayman is skipper of the community sailboat Klang II, a 1924 English Channel gaff-rigged yawl, and sails other vessels in New York harbor and beyond.

BY RIP HAYMAN

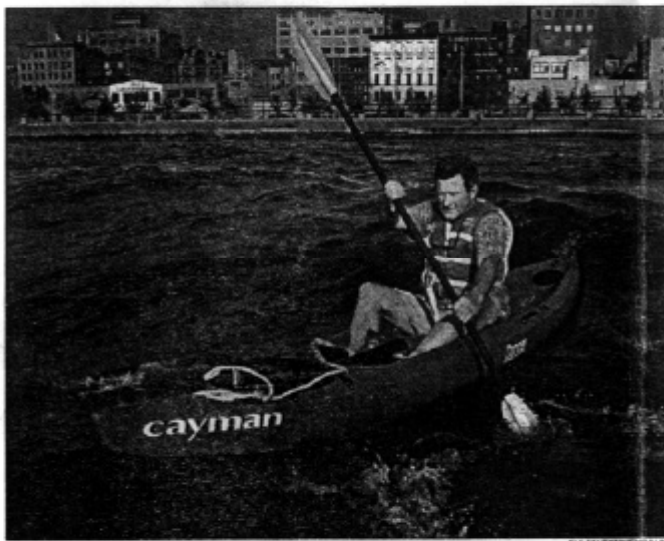
When I first moved Downtown in the early 1970s, you could not see the Hudson River, but you sure could smell it.

Pier buildings and an elevated highway kept local residents away from the river. The brief glimpses that we had of it were enticing, but not pretty. Garbage and worse were a daily affront. The stench was palpable: sewage, oil slicks, dead fish and a gray sludge of untreated human waste. The sea breeze wafted this brew of decay inland and reminded us that this was an island amid foul waters.

Nevertheless, I would drop my kayak through a hole in a fence at Canal street near Desbrosses and slip down a slimy seawall. The launch was precarious at best, the kayak wobbling in the fetid waters. It was hazardous paddling away from the pilings and rough dock edges, bracing for the sweep of tides, a speck of life cast off from the city.

Out in the mid-waters, it was suddenly glorious. Just offshore, one felt truly away from the grind of traffic and worries of the city. Only a few barges and smaller ships traversed the waters and their crews stared at me in wonder. Why would anyone want to be in such abusive waves? They would call out, "Hey kid! Where ya goin' in that?"

I would pull at the waves across to Ellis Island and around Liberty Island Park. Police would shoo me away from Miss Liberty. So I would land behind her on the last natural beach of the harbor on the Bayonne shore, now Liberty State Park. I would lie back on



Rip Hayman, kayaking recently along Tribeca's waterfront.

the sand and watch the city light up over the shimmering waters.

I was not going far, but I had to be there. I did not migrate to the isles of New York to be landlocked! I would lie in my bed near Washington Street and hear the ships' horns signal arrivals and departures like sirens drawing me to the water.

Along West Street, the piers were crowded with barges off-loading foodstuffs to Washington Market. Cargo ships from South America and Asia carried pungent goods to be stored along Washington Street in rundown warehouses. Sweet, tropical smells filled the area: cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper. We were living on a spice island, however concrete the jungle.

Longshoremen gathered like flies to unload the honey from ships. Cargo hooks hung on the stevedores' hind pockets, ready weapons if trouble was to be found. The old waterfront was, as old-timers once said quaintly, "no place for a lady."

shore. Acrid fumes of smoke and soot covered the area as the piers heaved hot and steamy into the tides. The city removed these carcasses of the maritime industry, and the waterfront was suddenly open to view.

When the highway was closed to traffic, the elevated roadway was used for a year as a grand pedestrian walkway. Bikers and strollers used this cobblestoned relic as the first riverside promenade, replete with striking ironwork icons for street names. (Check out the last one, remounted on the IPN overpass on Harrison Street near West Street. The concrete flying-wheel icons at the Greenwich Street entrance of Washington Park at Chambers Street is another relic.)

The sculpted iron trestles of the West Side Highway soon followed the piers into the junk heap of urban history.

When plans were announced to demolish the elevated road, I joined a group of residents who organized a "Requiem for the West Side Highway." Our ragtag chorus, brass band and dancers marched in a dirge along what remained of the highway to Canal Street. From the top of the Canal Street Bridge, we rained toy gold coins down onto the people and cars below to symbolize the waste of this public asset, and boondoggles yet to come.

Now the long years of planning and construction have yielded our new shore, glorious in its open vistas and human activities. But the scents have changed. The fragrance of sweating joggers and skateboarders mingles with perfumed dog walkers and baby strollers. How sweet it is.

I sail out now in (almost) clean waves and dodge the ferry traffic with fellow boaters who have reclaimed the waterfront for the natives. The shore is ours to enjoy in ways that make an old salt grin from nose to nose.

The old sailor and longshoreman clubhouse bars were Sweeney's and Dave's on Canal Street near Greenwich Street, and the Ear Inn on Spring Street, not far from the union-hiring hall where tough and grizzled workers lined up at dawn for what little work was left by the 1970s. The shipping was moving out of the neighborhood. The major bulk goods were being loaded at the new container terminals in New Jersey. Soon, the food market moved to Hunt's Point in the Bronx, and the pungent smells of Washington Market were no more.

The World Trade Center was then rising over the sandy landfill of the yet-to-be-built Battery Park City. I would sleep there on hot summer nights and take in the sea air. Geese flew off of ponds that formed in the landfill. Bonfires of the homeless cast flickers of humanity onto the gray Manhattan skyline.

Larger fires destroyed the remaining pier structures along the Tribeca