

BEYOND THE BAYONNE BRIDGE

by Peggy Taylor

Forget the kayaks, canoes, sail boats, and ferries to Fairway, Ikea, and Staten Island. When I want to sail New York Harbor, I take the Hidden Harbor Tours sponsored by the Working Harbor Committee. These tours give a glimpse of the harbor that New Yorkers rarely see---dry docks, oil storage depots, dredgers, roro ships, giant container terminals.

Where, I often wondered, do all the cute tug boats go to spend the night? Where do those giant container ships go to unload their cargo? Where did my iPad mini land before reaching my Apple Store at 67th and Broadway?

On Tuesday, July 9th, aboard the Zephyr excursion yacht, I took the Working Harbor's Newark Bay Tour, which would take me, at last, beyond the Bayonne Bridge. On previous tours, we had always reached the Bridge but always turned back. What lay beyond it? This time I would find out.



Our speaker was Ed Kelly, the Executive Director of the Maritime Association of the Ports of New York and New Jersey, and for two-plus hours, he educated and entertained us with the inner workings of the harbor.

The Port of New York is the twentieth largest in the world, the third largest in the States (after Los Angeles and Long Beach) and the largest on the East Coast. (Back in 1985, we were number one.) Every year, 9,000 big vessels ply the Harbor, and when one counts all the barges, ferries, and excursion boats, the number swells to 400,000. Because of its population density, New York Harbor handles 63% of all container ship business on the East Coast, more than Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Norfolk combined. In 2010, the Port generated 269,900 direct and indirect jobs, \$175 billion worth of general cargo, \$12 billion in personal income, and \$37 billion in general income. “Almost all of our furniture, clothes, alcoholic beverages, automobiles, and electronics,” Kelly said, “come through the Harbor. We import finished goods and export raw materials, making us officially once again a colony.”





That is not the only thing that has changed. In the mid-fifties, containerization came and decimated the ranks of 300,000 longshoremen, dwindling their numbers to 3,300. “They are few,” said Kelly, “but it's good to be a longshoreman these days. Workers who once loaded ships with hooks and brute force, now do highly sophisticated work operating high tech cranes and gantries. And these are full-time jobs, with six weeks paid vacation,

non-contributory health benefits and annual salaries of no less than \$135,000.”

New York Harbor, he reminded us, is also one of the country's major terrorist target sites along with the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels. Later, he would outline all the measures taken to keep the Harbor and us safe.



And off we sailed. We entered Kill Van Kull, the narrow waterway separating Staten Island from Bayonne, New Jersey, “the industrial core of today's working harbor and which handles all the container ships and car carriers bound for Newark Bay.” We passed the floating dry docks of Caddell Dry Dock and Repair, where vessels are

outfitted, repaired, and inspected. We entered “Tugboat Alley,” where all the cute little tugs spend the night. Then we passed a dredger dredging the waterway to accommodate bigger vessels which will make their way through the Kill after the Panama Canal is widened in 2015. Excitedly, we found ourselves behind a Latvian tanker being escorted by four tugs, and we followed it under the parabola-shaped Bayonne Bridge built in 1931. The Port Authority is planning to raise the road bed of the bridge by 65 feet by 2015, an absolute imperative if New York is to keep shipping traffic here and not lose it to cities like Norfolk or Charleston.



After we cleared the bridge, we entered Newark Bay, and this is where we discovered the Mother of all East Coast Container Terminals, the vast and sprawling terminal at Port Elizabeth/Newark. Here were the big boys of container shipping:
MAHER (Canadian) MAERSK (Danish) CMA CMG (French)
COSCO (The Chinese Ocean Shipping (Company) Not to be confused with Costco!



So here is where my iPad mini landed!

Kelly enumerated a impressive list of security measures employed by shippers and the Coast Guard to keep the port safe: cameras on the Bayonne and other bridges which can “read license plates and see your face;” radioactivity sensors on the container cranes; motion detectors; biohazard material detectors; biometric pictures; security guards; walls; perimeter control; X-ray machines at Customs examination stations where certain ships are searched extensively. (One recalls one such examination which, last July, led to the impounding of a North Korean freighter and the arrest of its 35-man crew, when the freighter tried to smuggle parts for a Soviet-made missile radar system from Cuba, and the captain tried to slit his throat!)



“You name it, we got it,” Kelly said. “And we do it so well that nobody knows about us. We’re kind of a hidden industry. But it’s better that way, because we don’t want the bad guys to find out.”

Sometimes there are false radioactivity alarms, and when that happens, “All hell breaks loose. Cops, helicopters, swat teams descend upon the ship; it’s a

wonderful thing to see,” said Kelly, relishing the professionalism and the excitement.

He also talked about the industry’s electronic bills of lading, which include: a detailed description of the container’s contents, its weight, its origin and destination. “Is it a regular or first-time shipper? We set up algorithms and note unusual patterns.” (Which is why the North Korean freighter raised suspicions. It hadn’t plied the waters of the Caribbean for 10 years!)

So this time, I succeeded in going beyond the Bayonne Bridge. The good news is that you can too, since there will be another Newark Bay Tour on Tuesday, September 10th. You’ll see the harbor as you’ve never seen it before. And you’ll see me as well, for I’ll be going again too.



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