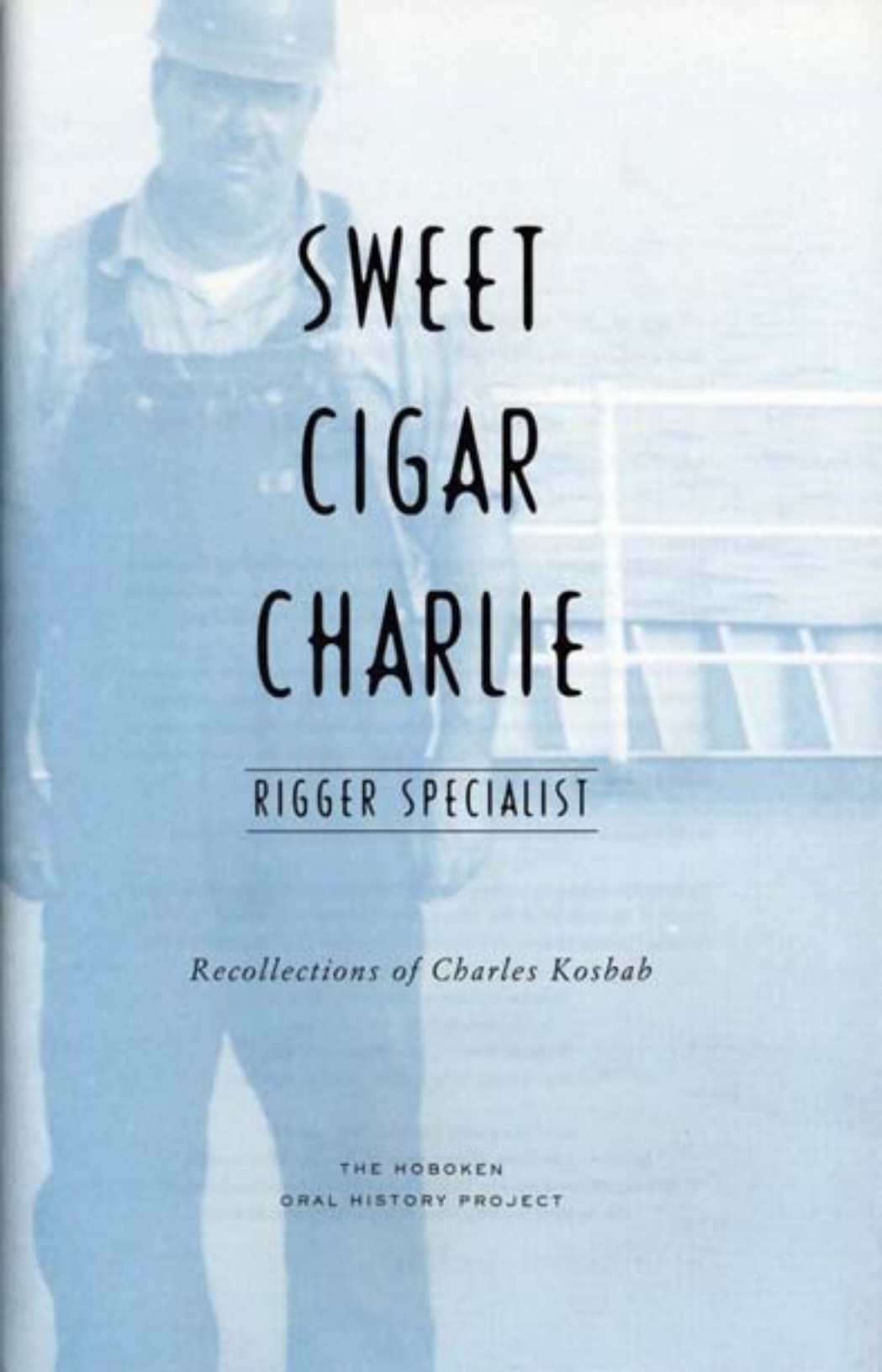
SWEET CIGAR CHARLIE

RIGGER SPECIALIST

RECOLLECTIONS OF CHARLES KOSBAB



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Recollections of Charles Kosbab

THE HOBOKEN
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

VANISHING HOBOKEN
The Hoboken Oral History Project

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Cover photograph of Charles Kosbab, circa 1965.
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Characters, we had plenty of them. Chain Four Willy, he was the snapper, a leading man. Texas Jack. Most of the men you knew here at the shipyard, you only knew their nickname. I always smoked cigars, so they called me "Sweet Cigar Charlie."

—CHARLIE KOSBAB
January 7, 2001

Introduction

CHARLES KOSBAB (1915 - 2001) AND THE HISTORY OF THE SHIPYARD

Charles Kosbab, born in 1915 in Hoboken, New Jersey, first visited the shipyard on Hudson Street when he was a child accompanying his father to work. When he was 16, Charlie, too, found work at the yard, and put in 53 years as a rigger specialist. His employment spanned several owners. This chapbook contains quotes from an interview with Mr. Kosbab at the Hoboken Historical Museum, 1301 Hudson Street, which opened in April 2001 in a renovated portion of the former Shipyard Machine Shop.

The Shipyard Machine Shop, a two-and-a-half story, thirty-six bay brick building that extends from 12th to 14th Streets on Hudson Street, was built by W. & A. Fletcher Co. in 1890. It is now the oldest structure on Hoboken's waterfront. Charlie Kosbab began work soon after Fletcher, once a leading designer and manufacturer of high-quality steam engines, sold the yards in 1928 to a consortium, United Dry Docks, which retained ownership until 1938.

Both United and Todd (another Hoboken shipyard) were embroiled in the general maritime strike of 1933. Representatives of the AFL charged that the "shape-up"—a system of daily labor contracting that required hundreds of prospective workers to gather at the

Bethlehem Steel Shipyard Machine Shop during the yard's wartime expansion, 1944.

company gates and wait to be chosen by a foreman for the day's work—was unfair at any time, but was especially intolerable during the Depression, when workers would shape up three times a day, in all weather, even though a full day of work was rare. But United and Todd refused to recognize the AFL, and the shape-up system continued.

Changes in shipbuilding technology—a change noted by Kosbab in this oral history—brought a new crop of independent, vitally necessary workers who rejuvenated worker-based union activism. Welders, who had no allegiance to the AFL, replaced the hierarchy of riveters, and helped develop the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, which ultimately succeeded in organizing the shipyards.

Bethlehem Steel acquired the United shipyards—including the Fletcher yard—in 1938. The leading producer of steel used for shipbuilding, Bethlehem Steel was also one of the largest consumers of steel through its chain of shipyards. Soon after the United States entered World War II, it began to upgrade and expand its Hoboken property, taking control of the 14th Street Lackawanna ferry property after the government demanded its seizure as a wartime necessity. The upgraded shipyard was ready to handle the massive shipbuilding program required for the war effort. Over 4,000 vessels were serviced at the Bethlehem Steel yards, including aircraft carriers, landing craft, supply ships, and destroyers.

The Hoboken yard expanded a bit more during peacetime, to accommodate its newest customers—oil tankers. This specialized work, as well as the transformation of Navy ships into civilian vessels (a kind of reversal of the yard's war-era ocean liner-to-troop-ship work), occupied shipyard workers throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the last strong years for the yard.

By the late 1960s, the effects of containerization—in which goods are transported as entire units and lifted onto tractor trailers up river for ground transport—were keenly felt at the Hoboken yard. Fewer tugs and barges were needed, necessitating fewer repairs. In an attempt to boost local employment, the National Alliance of Businessmen of Hudson County provided technical assistance and on-the-job training to thirteen women, who became the first women shipbuilders at the Bethlehem yard. In the 1970s, women were trained as riggers, welders, mobile crane operators, ship fitters, and electricians.

Bethlehem sold the Hoboken Shipyard to the Braswell Corporation in 1982. The new owner had plans to use the property to service Navy supply ships. Within two years, however, the property was up for sale again. The closure severed the property's ties to the ship repair trade, as potential buyers no longer considered the prop-

erty for use as a shipyard but as the site of luxury housing. In 1994, the property was acquired by the Applied Companies, a development company of longstanding in the city of Hoboken, which adapted the Machine Shop for re-use by residents and commercial tenants. It includes a permanent home for the Hoboken Historical Museum.

This interview with Charles Kosbab was conducted on January 7, 2001 by Lisa Sartori, a Museum trustee and filmmaker, who included selections in her documentary short, *A Shipyard in Hoboken*. Charlie Kosbab generously donated to the Museum artifacts from his years at the Bethlehem Steel; they were included in an inaugural exhibit at the Machine Shop and are now part of the Museum's permanent collection. A few weeks after the April 2001 opening, Mr. Kosbab passed away. When Lisa Sartori premiered *A Shipyard in Hoboken* at the Museum in July 2001, many former workers and members of Charlie's family came to reminisce. The Hoboken Oral History Project thanks Lisa Sartori and Helen Dowler for their assistance with this chapbook.

SHIPYARD WORKER AT 16

I was born and raised here. It was a good town. In Hoboken in them days we had districts. We had the Italian district; we had Polish, Jewish, German, Irish. Oh, yes, you can't forget the Irish! It was quite a place. Hoboken was quite a place.

We had mostly all immigrant people. People that came from the old country. They brought their trades with them, which you don't have now anymore. Those days are gone. Like in this type of industry here, the shipyard. All denominations. Usually in the hold work department, a lot of Scotch. Then we had Irish, mixed up with them. Then, in the machine shop, the primary man, I'll never forget his name, Dickman, a genius. He was a shop foreman. A wonderful man. The carpenters, most of them were Yugoslavians and Polish. And they were good men, too. Then you had the Germans; they did the fancy work, the cabinetwork inside, on the ships.

My dad worked here as a rigger from 1911 until he retired. He retired in the late '50's. [Toward the end of his time here] he was inside mostly. He took care of the gear coming and also did timekeeping work. He made out your time cards. You had to punch in a card in and out. And then, there was traveling time. When you were outside and you had to go back overland, by train or whatever. They take care of your expenses that way.

My dad put in a lot of time here. He used to bring me to this place in his arms, when I was only a youngster. In them days you could do things like that.

Then I started to come to visit him. You know, the place was practically wide open—to me anyway. I was about 16 years old when I started, as a laborer. I worked with the laborers about a year, and then I got in with the riggers. We had two rigging departments. We had the hull riggers, and the machinists riggers, for the inside work. Most of the riggers had sea experience—the deck work, like the booms.

In them days, you had to shape up to come here to find if there was going to be any work, and when ships came in, they would come in at all hours. You never knew when they were coming in. We used to hang out on the corner over here on 14th Street. And the employment manager, he had an office right outside the building. When they needed men—like riggers, machinists—he'd come out and he'd start picking you out, and you would go to work. In them days we weren't unionized. Unions came in around '37.

[When I started working here, W. & A. Fletcher, the original shipyard company, had gone bankrupt]. They had a ship here that nearly sunk, capsized. I think her name was the Ponce de Leon.

Bethlehem Steel Shipyard employee cards, circa 1941.
Abandoned on the property and retrieved by Hoboken Historical Museum curator Robert Foster in 1990.

And they had some hold work on it. They took some plates off, close to the water line. Somehow or another she took a list during the night. She down-sided.

[After Fletcher, the shipyards were owned by] United Dry Dock, then Bethlehem Steel. Then Bethlehem picked up most of the shipyards [in the area]. Staten Island—they did ship building, ship repair, they made propellers. They had quite a thing going. Now it's all gone. Gone by the way of the dinosaur.

SHIPYARD JOBS

You had inside machinists, then you had outside machinists that worked on the ships outside. Wheel gang machinists — inside working on turbine pumps. You had the pipefitting department, which handled all the pipe work on the ships, and they serviced the ships coming with air and water. Then you had the electrical department; they did all the electrical work on the ship, plus servicing the ships when they come in, hooking up shorelines and temporary light. They called it the "temp light department." You had the carpentry, the ship's carpenters, the joiners.

Now, let's see now, am I forgetting anyone? Oh yes—then you had the dry dock department. Maintenance was a big department, maintaining cranes. And the plate shop. They would do all the laying out of the plate work. Whatever had to be done was built in there, and then sent out. They had them well on top [in a loft].

The loft went way out, where they would work off prints. You had a damage job, especially a shape print, if it was damaged, say, on the starboard side, they would take off a print to see what the shape looks like on the starboard side for the port side. And then lay them out, bend them, shape them. And then bring it back to the ship after the damage was ripped out and reinstalled. Or sometimes, they had

Blading a turbine rotor in the Bethlehem Steel Shipyard Machine Shop, photo circa 1940. Included in a company brochure found on the property in 1990.

the ship fitters going down there and making templates of the shape and take it back to the shop.

Years ago, before the war, we had the Fruit Line coming in. Like this time of the year [winter], they would lay up. They was all in the banana, orange trade, you know, and we did all their servicing. Some of them were beautiful inside—the workmanship. Everything was mahogany. The work that was going [on] here, especially with the Germans. We had the carpenter shop, top floor. I remember the mold loft we had; they made all the molds for the foundry—propeller blades, engine casings.

Oh yes, it was quite an interesting business. That's if you took an interest in it. You could learn an awful lot here.

LEARNING THE TRADE

We had a school here for rigging, ship fitting. You had the machine shop, electrical work. It was one of the most interesting industries—anywhere.

I was classified as a rigger specialist, which would allow me to expand my trade in my line. Also, as a leading man, when particular jobs came up, I had to lead the gang, which was called a "snapper." To every so many men, they would assign a snapper—the leader.

We were like a service trade. When machinery had to be moved from a ship, we had to come in and get it out. And it could be most anything. Pistons, crankshafts. When I say crankshafts, I'm talking 38–, 40–ton pieces of metal. One of the most interesting ones was what we called "wheel jobs." That was removing propellers, drawing the tail shaft. That was all riggers' work and machinists' work.

We serviced the pipe fitters, the electricians. Whatever had to be moved, we came in on it. Plus our own work. Work the ships' rigging. Riggers were riggers, but they used to specialize you know. They would use the same men all the time for that certain kind of work, like the engine rooms. They would like to keep the same men that were familiar with the job.

Charles Kovbab's identification card, circa 1940.

Anything heavy was rigger's work. Plus we did the rigging on ships as well. Cargo booms, heavy lift booms. We had a heavy lift shipment here we did for the Government, specially built

Gantry crane on Hoboken pier, 1944.

below the motor. One hundred and fifty-tons they could handle. We had to test all their sheaves, wiring. The Government was very strict when they did any work like that. Repair work all had to be weight-tested; you had to use a dynamo. The same with lifeboats. All life boats, at least once a year, had to be tested to meet Coast Guard or Navy requirements. You loaded them with weights and rolled them down to about a foot above the water. They had releasing gear on them, which you released to see if that gear went over. If they went into trouble at sea, they would be sure they could release them.

Riggers, we needed the crane operators to make the lifts. We

pulled gears out of ships. They averaged at least up to 42 tons. That's what I've handled. And then they had to be shipped up to New York State. We had to prepare them for shipping. And you couldn't hoist them because the gearing was so fine. In fact, our machinists sometimes had to smooth them out. It took days. And there was quite a few fouls among the gears.

In most of these stern jobs, the stern tube was a wood they used called lignum. The bearings were very heavy. They used to nickname it "ironwood." But then, in the later years, after the war, they went into metal bearings. It was much easier.

[I communicated with the crane operator] with signals. You had whistle signals. One up, one stop, two down, everything was done by voice or hand—if you could see the operators! A lot of truck you had to have with the guy in the crane. The only problem they had was at night; they had to use flashlights.

On Pier 2, we used steam cranes for a while until we got the gantries. Pier 2 never had gantries. Pier 3 we installed gantries. We didn't need them anymore. But Pier 1, if I had to signal, if I had something going in the hold of a ship, I had to have a signalman near the rail, so that he could see the engineer.

RIVETERS BECOME WELDERS

The welding department started right here in this shipyard, on repair. We never had welding before. Everything was riveted. When welding came, then we started to expand. It was before the war, like in the early 30's when we started welding. We only had one welding machine here, and that was on the truck.

We used to take them on what we called "boiler repairs," on outside jobs. We went all over the harbor repairing ships. That was part of the job here. You know a ship never made money laying in the

shipyard. It had to be on the way. When they took jobs, there was always demurrage charges if we held back or we were late on the job.

Of course, we liked the time of material jobs. They were the best. They were the money jobs. They had to get the ships out. There was no question about the amount of men they would put on, and the material they used, as long as they got that ship out. One of our best customers was the Seatrain Line. They used to dock right over here in Hoboken. Go right along the side here. In fact, we were the first to do their repair work—right until the day they went out of business.

UNIONS

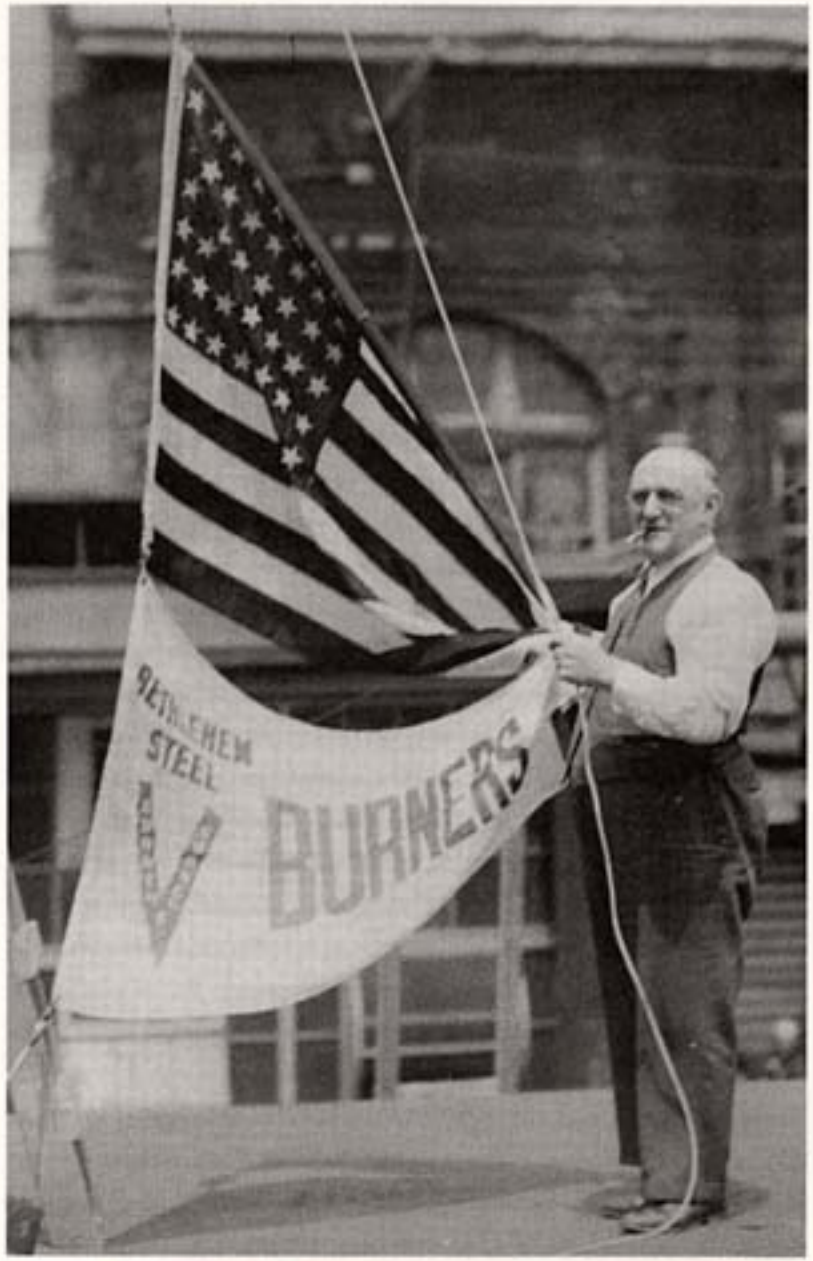
The union. . . we never gained recognition until 1937. We did go out on strike for 6 months prior to that. And when it was settled, they recognized us. But that was only union recognition. But later on come conditions and so forth. Forty-seven we had another big one. That was another 6 months. And we had another one in 1960. That was another big one. See, we had to get around to make a living.

We were looking for better conditions. We did some. I think we improved quite a bit in our pension systems when Bethlehem came out. I'm not complaining at all.

Seniority was a big question here. Then if you were a tradesman, like a carpenter, or a ship fitter, you stood in that trade. You couldn't work out of it—which was good during the war.

WORLD WAR II

We worked right around the clock here. Seven days a week. We had ten-hour shifts. That was the law at the time. And I believe it still is. You couldn't keep anyone going longer than ten hours, but in emer-



World War II-era photograph celebrating work output of Bethlehem Steel burners.
Photograph by Bethlehem Steel employee, William Craig

gencies. Later on, we went on to the regular [shifts]. But even during the war, when we finished shifts here, we had to go with them on trial runs, to finish uncompleted work that had to be done. And I tell you, we went away, and sometimes we didn't come home until at least two weeks. We went off shore. But then you had to be under escort, too, because at the time there, the subs got so bad, that we had to use the Long Island Sound for trial runs. And all your guards, they carried arms.

My work was reconverting, rebuilding the ships for the soldiers. Bunks, sanitary systems. Everything had to be done just right. We had supply ships that carried supplies for troops and ships at sea, Navy tankers, refueling ships.

In here, we did have, during the war, as high as 24 vessels being repaired, being converted from cargo ships to troop ships. We had the bigger ships like the *Queen Mary, Aquatania, Mauritania*, which were carrying troops. And the *Queen Mary*, we had her tied up for 30 days over at a pier in New York. We had as many—maybe more—men working on these outside jobs, than we had in the yard at one time. We were putting up armaments, anti-magnetizing, you know, to prevent the magnetic mines. We even had a minelayer here. We converted a minelayer. I believe that was done at the time the *Normandy* was on fire. She was on Pier 2. We could see it right from the end of the pier. The only thing we worried about was the ammunition or oil.

Paravanes, those what they used for sweeping for mines. They looked like little airplanes. You had a little problem with one of them on a dry run. Our supervisor went along, he was a naval architect, Peter Mitchell. I had to go up and rig out the paravane. I know as much about paravanes as the man in the moon. I had instructions on it, what to do. Well I found out that the paravane that we put on, the vanes we called them, they had to be shortened up. The faster the ship, the shorter the wings. The slower the ship, the wider they were.

I did have an experience right here on 14th Street. Someone men-

tioned to me, during the war, that there was a man up on our roof taking pictures. At the time I remember we had a convoy in the harbor here that was going overseas. That convoy was quite large. It went from the bridge all the way down to the narrows. One of the largest convoys ever to leave here. That was a little before D-Day. And this guy was up on the roof taking pictures. One of my neighbors told me about it, and I did something I wasn't supposed to do. I had a weapon; it was legal. I went up and took him down and handed him over. There was a cop there, Pat Kelleny, and I told Pat what it was all about. He took him down. From there I never heard no more about it. But what was he doing on the roof taking pictures of the shipyard and the convoy?

But outside of that we didn't have too much. We had false warnings. We had one here where they emptied the yard out. [They reported] they were bombing Boston. That was in the afternoon, and then the Superintendent, he tried to get the guys back in. But they got out to the bars. You had about 20 bars on Washington Street. Rowalds, Frank Crawford's. You had Romano's, your Liberty Bar, then you had the Madison. Across the way where I lived there was a bar down there. Two on the next corner of Bloomfield Street. You had about 18 bars. Now how would you expect them guys to come back in again? And I tell you, when the whistle used to blow here at dinnertime and supper-time, there was a stampede on to 14th Street. Oh, there's a lot of memories here. A lot of memories, good and bad.

DRY DOCKS

A graving dock is stationary, it's a hole in the ground. And a dry dock is floating; they're actually pontoons. The lower pontoon was divided into 6 individual sections. Three on one side. The ring walls were separated. Now they had pumps on the top, ring walls that would

Ships in dry dock at Hoboken's Bethlehem Steel shipyard, with New York City skyline beyond, 1943.

pump out the water when you put a ship on the dry dock. In later years, they came out with the gauges, but before that, it was all hand signaling up there, so they come out even.

We had four dry docks. Originally there was only one. That was on Pier 2, the south side of Pier 2. Then they got another one. They put her on Pier 3. The second one come in and then later on we got the ones from the war, when they were built three and four. We had four dry docks all told. Then we reconverted some of them after the war. We took the wing walls off, the wood wing walls. And oh yes, the one on dry dock 2. She came over in the later part of 1800's. And we also took the wooden wing walls off that and installed metal wing walls. I worked on that, removing the wing walls with the floating rig-

ger we had. And when they cut that wood, it was like the day it was put in. The pine, you could smell that all over the place. And we had to take the old section up by Edgewater where the Seatrain Line is.

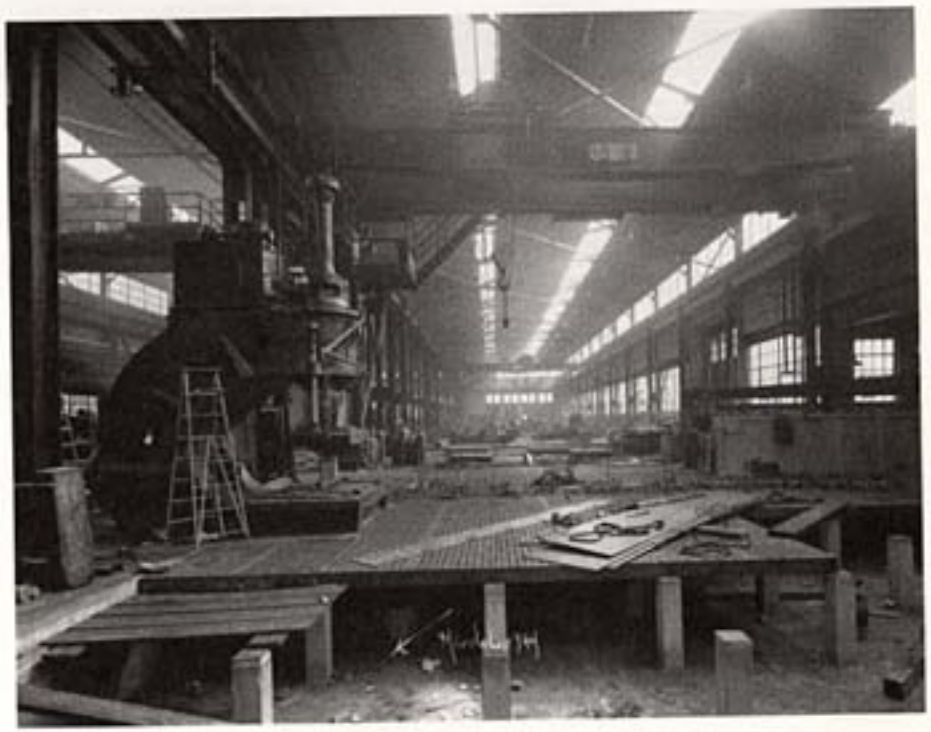
They would submerge the ship to let it go down. Of course, they would be given a little time on that—to sink her down. They brought her in and they had a man at the head of the dock. With the wind, she would have the head line even in. You had the dock hands on the wing wall with (some kind of) lines checking her. And then, of course, tow boats helping along, too. There were times here in the winter, when it was very scary on the dry dock with the ice coming in. It took us days some times to get our work done on the dry dock, where we had to do hold work, the bottom jobs, with the ice that used to come with them. And I mean *ice*. We stood on the piers for days with the cranes—the steam cranes—hosing down with steam, everything breaking up, and picking it up. And then we even had tow boats tied up at the end of the pier turning over their engines to try to keep it out from going on to the docks. Then they rigged up air lines at the end of the docks on the apron. They kept air coming, but it still came in.

[I tell you, when you went in between that dry dock, it was like going down a canyon. When you are between, looking up at them things. We were doing a job after the war, when they brought back arms transports. We converted them back into what they were. They were cutting the stern loose from the rest of the boat when she snapped. You want to see something here. See the stern end of the ship rolling. And we had a tremendous amount of work, we were shipping some of our dry docks off to the west coast. It was a mad house. We had jobs believe me.

THE MACHINE SHOP

Whenever there was something special going on—anything heavy—I'd work in the machine shop. Like, we had standup propellers. To put them in, we had to put them in a pit in order to fit the shafts—we called them pear shafts—into the propeller. The tapered end of them had to be blued, and when we used to ram them into the propeller, they would show the color. They would call that "a percentage." The higher the percentage, the better the fit.

There was an iron beam, way up on the top, in the machine shop. I don't know if they took it out or not. And we used to hang out our rigging on that for lifting up the line. Of course, the shafts had to be



Machine Shop interior, 1944.

put in the pit. The cranes lifted up to 27-28 tons. These liners, the heaviest were about 5 tons. That's a lot of weight up there. That's what this building stood. She took the weight. To be on the safe side, we tested it. Accumulated a bunch of weights and we made a test run of it. To make sure. It would be awful embarrassing. We had to be safe you know. It depended on men's lives, especially with rigging.

DANGEROUS WORK

I believe we did average one to two fatalities a year. In this line of business, in this yard alone, you always had a fatality. But then again we had people coming that never worked in the shipyard. You had to break these people in. You had to teach them. It was pretty hard on some of them. Pretty hard.

We had one welder right here on Pier 3 had a damaged job, burning a section of plate. The plate went, it took him with it and he drowned. Then we had welders coming up out of the double bottoms, and after doing their jobs, they were electrocuted. We had riggers working in the tanks putting in stages. Plank come down, and he was gone. There was a welder, they found him dead. I don't know what happened to him. The machine shop wasn't bad at all. I don't think they had any fatalities. Accidents but no fatalities. The fatalities were outside on the job.

We had a dispensary here with a doctor and a male nurse. Both here around the clock. Well I think they had to do that by law. They could [fix] mostly anything. The doctor that we had here, I think Hamilton was his name, he was an army surgeon when he came here and he still was in the reserve. Maintenance men greasing their trucks, they had to use their hands to put that black stuff in among the gears and somebody motioned come ahead. Took his fingers off. They amputated them. And they sewed them up right here in the dispensary.

Detail of work safety poster, circa 1960.

In the old days, all we had was a little cubby hole. The rest room—that was our dispensary. And that was only a nurse that we had here. Her name was Mrs. Jennings. And then we had a doctor come in. On Pier 11 he had an office. We used to get sent up there.

[We capped propellers here in the yard. They were made at] Ferguson in Hoboken or the Staten Island Yard. And then, of course, every ship had a spare propeller on it. And if it got so bad, they were sent to Ferguson. It took some time to rebuild them, so we would take the spare off the ship and use the spare. Repairing a propeller at sea couldn't be done. It was very rare that they ever done anything like that at sea, because it took too much balance. It was rough. We did a lot of work, like harbor work going down to the anchorage and down off Staten Island. We had quite a bit of work down there. Scary work too. You had to board tankers carrying gasoline. We laid alongside with our derricks. And whatever happened in our engine room, our exhaust went up higher, and here's a ship loaded with gasoline.

[A lot of blocking was done on a vessel that was in the dry dock.] Bilge blocks, keel blocks and sometimes the docks hands where you had damage on the bottom. The keel blocks were in the way. They had to ram them out. We had a young fellow years ago was electrocuted on that. The ships that came on the dry dock, they had to be grounded. What they would do, they would run a heavy cable down into the mud with a plate on it, and that would take whatever current on the ship down and ground it. But it seems that at this time they weren't welding, they were wedging, and somehow it got knocked loose. And the dock master who was there, he was with the gang. They had a big ram, a big wooden and steel ram that they used to knock these blocks out with. They were built like a wedge, where you could knock them out in case you needed them. Also on the top of the block, you had a steel frame built, which was loaded in between with sand. When a ship hit them, it had something soft to stay on a little bit.

This young fellow, they were knocking the blocks out using that ram, knocking the blocks out and something happened with this grounding cable, and he got the whole charge through him. He knocked them loose, the guy was black when he fell down. That's why I say, fatalities here was nothing strange to us.

Asbestos was our biggest [health hazard in terms of dangerous materials.] And then don't forget we did tanker work. We worked on oil, we had sulfur ships coming in years ago, carrying sulfur. And that was highly polluted. Some of these tankers coming, they carried all kinds of chemicals. In fact we had some of them go on fire here, but luckily not too much damage was done.

You know we worked on asbestos where I wouldn't be able to see you from here. When you got into an engine room job where you had turbines, all them cases you had to raise up, and they were covered with asbestos, and that had to be ripped away. All your pipes were covered with asbestos. When you removed the pipe you had to remove the asbestos too.

We didn't know in them days what we know now. Things have changed. In fact we had a ship on Pier 1, it was one of them baby flattops after the war which they were reconverting back to student

Rigging a propeller, photograph by Benedict J. Fernandez, circa 1971-1973.

exchange ships. She was one of the few diesel-operated ships that the Americans ever built here. They didn't go too much in for diesel, always turbines and fellows ran torch ships under the flight decks. And they were all encased in asbestos blocking. But we had to remove [it] because they were all going back into the original shape that they were in.

When we took them off, they underestimated the weight. And the night before, it had rained and the asbestos soaked up a lot of this moisture, which caused an overload. They thought we could have handled it. They estimated it weighed 15 tons, but when we started to pick it up, the cranes were straining too much so we had to put on 2 cranes. We got it down on the pier and all that asbestos — there must have been tons of it—it was all in the system.

AFTER THE WAR

Years ago, when we had the German ships coming in here, they were always good for food. You know the German food, herring and stuff like that. We did a tremendous amount of work here. We did a lot of work with the Holland American Line. We had a job on one of them, it was the New Amsterdam. That was at the time they were making that movie *On the Waterfront*. The weather was kind of bad then, I remember. We could look right down on them. They had a little barge there where they used to meet. Oh, we had a lot things going on.

We also did work for the World Trade Fair. We built that floating, octagon-shaped gas station for Sinclair. It weighed 85 tons. Built right here at the head of Pier 5, on a platform. From there it went into the water and then over to the World's Fair.

Don't forget, this wasn't the only source of employment. You had to move around to the bicycle shops, when there was no work here.

Marlon Brando and crew shooting scenes from On the Waterfront *on a Hoboken rooftop, River Street, 1953.* Photographer unknown

You had to go to Todd's [another Hoboken shipyard, at 15th Street]. You had turbine engineers, condenser servicers. We had quite a few. We called them bicycle shops. You had to move around.

NOTABLES

We had one battleship called the Washington, she came in. We had to do some servicing on her, and tankers galore. We had a Greek-owned ship, I believe she was named the Christina Onassis. We had Jackie O. walking right through the shop, down to the ship. Yes, I remember going through here, going right down the road, it was tied up here. It was Pier 1 at that time. Oh, we had some notability here. Years ago, before the war, the United States Line, we had some of the Rockefeller family come down.

FELLOW WORKERS

Characters, we had plenty of them. We had Chain Four Willy, he was the snapper, he was a leading man. Oh we had so many of them. Texas Jack. They're all gone. Most of the men you knew here, you only knew their nickname, you never knew their last name. "Go get Money Bags." Oh that was something.

I always smoked cigars, so they called me Sweet Cigar Charlie. You'd always see me with a cigar. I think that might have saved my lungs a little bit.

Women shipyard workers? After the war we had one woman working in the rigger department. We had a crane operator here. She lives over in [Fox Hill, the apartment complex for seniors]. She came as an apprentice here. All I know is her first name, Mickey [Michelina Fontana]. I forget her last name. I worked with her.

"Money Bags John," a Bethlehem Steel rigger. Photograph by Benedict J. Fernandez, circa 1971-1973

Lucille Haack also worked here. She worked as an operator on one of the heisters here—portable cranes—for quite awhile. I knew her very well. I knew her before she was married, even. She was the only one on the heisters I think. They've got a 5-ton limit – and that's if you knew how to use them.

RETIREMENT AND THE CLOSING OF THE SHIPYARD

The last couple of years I was maintaining the chain hoist. We had chain hoists here up to 50 tons, which had to be serviced and tested,

because they are handling heavy material. We used to use them on what we called the wheel jobs, removing propellers and stuff like that.

It all depended on the person doing the job, how well you liked your work. To me everything was just interesting. I even stood by my 65th year; I worked here a year over that. They told me it was going to close. About a year after I left, it went.

I been here all my life. In fact, my hangout, after I even retired, was Pier 16, when we had the Palace. Fishing boats coming in. That's where I always was. I did my little fishing out of there, and I always went out on the boats if I wanted to.

Hoboken now? Well, I tell you. It leaves a lot to think about. I believe it's being over-developed. There's an over development here. I don't think we are going to be able to control it. You can't control parking in this city. You can't shop here anymore. I know I can't. I can't walk like I used to. I miss The Avenue.

I'm glad something like [the Hoboken Historical Museum] is happening to preserve the memory of the shipyard. I'm surprised that they don't have one of the roads here named after Fletcher. You should suggest that. Somewhere, even the pier.

THE HOBOKEN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

"Vanishing Hoboken," an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and the Hoboken Historical Museum in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to the consequent "vanishing" of certain aspects of public life.

For much of the last century, Hoboken was a working-class town, home to many waves of immigrant families, and to families who journeyed from the southern regions of the U.S. and from Puerto Rico—all looking for work. Hoboken, close to ports of entry in New Jersey and New York, offered a working waterfront and many factories, as well as inexpensive housing. Each new wave of arrivals—from Germany, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Cuba, and Puerto Rico— found work on the waterfront, at the Bethlehem Steel Shipyards, Lipton Tea, Tootsie Roll, Maxwell House, or in numerous, smaller garment factories. Then the docks closed in the 1960s; and factory jobs dwindled as Hoboken's industrial base relocated over the 1970s and '80s. Maxwell House, once the largest coffee roasting plant in the world, was the last to leave, in 1992. In the go-go economy of the 1980s, Hoboken's row houses, just across the river from Manhattan, were targeted by developers to young professionals seeking an easy com-

mute to New York City. Historically home to ever-changing waves of struggling families—who often left when they became prosperous—Hoboken began in the mid-1980s to experience a kind of reverse migration, where affluent condominium-buyers replaced poor and working class tenants, many of whom had been forced out by fire, through condo-conversion buy-outs, or through rising rents. More recently, building construction has further altered the face of Hoboken, as anonymous, modern towers are rising up alongside the late-19th century row houses that once spatially defined our densely populated, mile-square city and provided its human scale.

The Hoboken Oral History Project was inaugurated in the summer of 2000 with the goal of capturing, through the recollections of longtime residents, "Vanishing Hoboken"—especially its disappearing identity as a working-class city and its tradition of multi-ethnic living. The Project focuses on collecting the oral histories of residents who can evoke Hoboken's vanished industries through their recollections of employment in the city's many factories and on the waterfront, and those who can capture for present and future generations the ways in which Hoboken's rich ethnic and cultural diversity was once evident in the everyday life of the city. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of Cultural Affairs in the Department of State, the Hoboken Oral History Project transcribed and edited seven oral histories to produce a series of "Vanishing Hoboken" chapbooks. Since 2002, seven chapbooks have been published with the support of the Commision and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

VANISHING HOBOKEN CHAPBOOKS

The editor of this series chose to call these small booklets "chapbooks," a now rarely heard term for a once-common object. And so, a brief explanation is now required: A chapbook, states the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

> *small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapmen, in western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5 x 4 inches in size and were made up of four pages (or multiples of four), illustrated with woodcuts. They contained tales of popular heroes, legends and folklore, jests, reports of notorious crimes, ballads, almanacs, nursery rhymes, school lessons, farces, biblical tales, dream lore, and other popular matter. The texts were mostly rough and anonymous, but they formed the major parts of secular reading and now serve as a guide to the manners and morals of their times.*

Chapbooks began to appear in France at the end of the 15th century. Colonial America imported them from England but also produced them locally. These small booklets of mostly secular material continued to be popular until inexpensive magazines began to appear during the early 19th century.

Although some of the chapbooks in the Vanishing Hoboken series are considerably longer than their earlier counterparts, others are nearly as brief. They are larger in size, to allow us to use a reader-friendly type size. But all resemble the chapbooks of yesteryear, as they contain the legends, dreams, crime reports, jokes, and folklore of our contemporaries. One day, perhaps, they might even serve as guides to the "manners and morals" of our city, during the 20th and early 21st centuries.

A Project of

The Friends of the Hoboken Public Library and

the Hoboken Historical Museum