



The Hook

RECOLLECTIONS OF DONALD "RED" BARRETT



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*A chapbook from the "Vanishing Hoboken" series
of the Hoboken Oral History Project*

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

A Project of the Hoboken Historical Museum and
the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library

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Contemporary photos of Donald “Red” Barrett by Robert Foster.
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chapbook are courtesy of Donald “Red” Barrett.
ENDPAPERS: Hold gang unloading rolls of newsprint
from a ship’s hold, ca. 1965.

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if you were on the waterfront with the
guys [you needed it to move cargo]—
I always kept it on my belt, [even] when
I’d be driving the car. But this one day,
I take it off my belt, and I throw it
on the floor. So don’t you think that a
cop car [stopped me] because my back
light was broken? When the cop saw
that hook, the shithead took it. I should
have told him, “You have a gun for work.
And that’s what I have—the hook.”*

—Donald “Red” Barrett

August 28, 2015



*Longshoremen Red Barrett (left) and Ralph Perretti,
at a freight terminal, Hoboken, ca. 1965.*

Introduction

Donald “Red” Barrett was a longshoreman for 34 years, working on piers in Brooklyn, Newark, and Hoboken. Like the other men in his work gang, he spent every workday moving by hand countless bags, boxes, and barrels of goods and food from ship holds and freight terminals to waiting trucks (or the reverse). And like them, he carried on his belt the principal tool a longshoreman needed to secure and move all that cargo: the hook.

But Red—so called by his fellow workers because of his red hair—also carried something else when he went to work: a disposable camera. When the job took him to Brooklyn, the bosses stopped him from photographing the docks, but the bosses on Pier C in Hoboken, where he worked for 15 years, were easy-going, and allowed Red to record his working life. From 1955 until 1970, when the shipping companies abandoned Hoboken, Red documented the hiring hall (“the shape-up” on the top floor of City Hall), the docks, the cargo ships, and his fellow longshoremen—day by day amassing a vital record of the city’s working waterfront.

And when urban renewal came to Hoboken, and whole blocks of River and Hudson Streets were cleared in 1969 to make way for parking garages and the Marine View complex, Red was there to record the neighborhood that had once been studded with bars and old hotels catering to stevedores and merchant marines.

Although Red had lived in Hoboken since 1955, he was unsentimental about the demolition. When the rubble was removed, he documented the new construction.

After 1970, his job took him to Newark, a port that could accommodate the container ships the Hoboken piers could not. The job changed, too; containerization eliminated manual sorting: the hook became obsolete. Dockworkers used huge machines to move shipping containers.

In 1989, Red took a buy-out and retired. He still lives in Hoboken. For many years he continued to photograph changes on the city's waterfront, including the demolition of the Maxwell House factory in 2000. He claims no nostalgia for the old days on the docks. He simply did the work, double-time—longshoreman and photographer, both.

Red Barrett was interviewed at his apartment on Hudson Street in Hoboken, on August 28, 2015, by Robert Foster and Holly Metz. Copies of the transcript from which this chapbook was derived have been deposited in the archives of the Hoboken Historical Museum and in the Historical Collection of the Hoboken Public Library.

STARTING OUT IN BROOKLYN

My mother was born in Hoboken, and my father was born in Scranton, in Pennsylvania. I was born in Brooklyn. December 3, 1932.

[We all lived in Flatbush.] I had an older brother, John, who was in the Marine Corps, [an older sister, Eileen, and] a twin sister, Dorothy. I was the baby brother.



Donald "Red" Barrett and the McLaughlin sisters in Brooklyn, before leaving for the service, ca. 1952.

My father was a window dresser. He used to do the windows in Grand Central and another big department store. He was great [at that job]: crepe paper, and yeah, he took the tacks, and he would hold the tacks in his mouth, and with a hammer that had the magnet on it, and boom, boom, boom, he'd do that [and tack up all the decorations]. In fact, the bar [near] where we lived in Brooklyn—it was called Duffy's—they would have him come to decorate the back bar.

People would come to Duffy's. They had the jukebox, and they would sing along and all that. It's funny with the record collection I have...they're old time songs. My mother's favorite song was "In Old Shanty Town," and my father's was "When Day Is Done." My song was "Whispering." I really liked that. It was done first by Paul Whiteman [in 1920].



Above: *Joking around in Brooklyn, ca. 1952. From left: One of the McLaughlin sisters; unidentified man; Red's brother, John; another McLaughlin sister; Donald "Red" Barrett.*

Opposite: *Paul Whiteman and His Ambassador Orchestra, from a page of sheet music, 1921. Whiteman was so popular in the 1920s and '30s, newspaper editors dubbed him the "King of Jazz."*

COMING TO HOBOKEN: WATERFRONT HOTELS

I was in the service from '53 to '55, in the Army, so '55 is when I came over here. It was my uncle who got me the job working on the piers in Hoboken. I did work in Brooklyn, also, for a short time.

[What did I think of Hoboken?] A square town, convenient to get to New York on a train and the ferry. I like Hoboken.

When I moved here, a lot of people—including myself, before I got the furnished room—lived in hotels. I stayed in the Grand Hotel. Seamen stayed at Meyer's Hotel and the Hotel Victor, too.



Postcard of the Grand Hotel, Third and Hudson Streets, Hoboken, ca. 1950. Hoboken Historical Museum collection. In 1955, when Red lived there, rent for a furnished room with a refrigerator was nine dollars a week.

FURNISHED ROOM, FURNISHING MUSIC

[After the hotel,] I moved to the furnished room at 250 Park Avenue. Ann and Ralph, they were the owners of the building.

(Looks at photo of his kitchen.) You know I took my clothes to the laundromat in Hoboken—to the Chinese laundry. I didn't have an iron. (Laughs.)



Red Barrett's kitchen, 250 Park Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1957.

THE SHAPE-UP AND THE GANG

A typical workday—well, I was up early in the morning—5:00 or 6:00. And then I'd go to the hiring hall. That was over at City Hall—the shape-up. I took the car down there just in case I couldn't get a job in Hoboken and then I had to travel.



Red Barrett's living room, 250 Park Avenue, Hoboken, ca. 1957.

(Looks at photo he took of his living room.) Why did I take a picture of my room? Well, just to remember where I had everything—scattered all around. *(Laughs.)*

[And the reel-to-reel tape recorder?] I don't have that anymore. The thing was for me, but I told the owners [of the Shannon and other bars] I had music on reel-to-reel, and they let me play it there—the old time songs—and people sang along.



The hiring hall for the International Longshoremen's Association was on the top floor of Hoboken's City Hall for many years. Photo ca. 1970.



Hold gang with hooks unloading crates, boxes, and bags of Indian jute from a ship hold, ca. 1969.

In Hoboken, I worked on Pier C. I think most of the guys lived in Hoboken.

You had the deck gang and you had the hold gang. There were seven men in a gang. [The hardest work] was in the hold.



International Longshoremen's Association pin, ca. 1950. Hoboken Historical Museum collection.



Loading plywood from the dock to the hold, to use to separate cargo, ca. 1970.

[On Pier C, there would be a mix of stuff to unload.] Pallets. Rolls of paper. Steel, which was rolled. A big hi-low, that had a metal thumb, went into the roller and then pulled it out. And then we just hooked it up.

The gang that I was with—it was always the same gang. The men had nicknames like “Big Nose” Tony, “Fat the Miser.” (*Laughs.*) They always called me “Red,” [because of my red hair]. I worked with the same gang right to the end. [If someone was ill,] the boss would go to the hall and get an extra guy just to fill in.

TAKING PICTURES

I forget just exactly when I started taking pictures.

In Hoboken, I could take pictures, but when I went to Brooklyn, I wasn't allowed to.

I had one of those throwaway cameras. That was the camera that I used to take these pictures. I think I always had it with me.

[Where did I get my film processed?] At People's Photo on Washington Street. [But I didn't show them around after.] Nobody was really interested.



Some men from Red's gang on Pier C, Hoboken, ready to put pallets on a ship, ca. 1965. Left to right: "Big Nose" Tony, Joey Lisa, Steve Gerone.

There was one guy I still remember: "The Reverend" Arthur J. Jennings. He had a pencil on his ear. And if you were in his gang, he would watch the men working. And if he thought that you weren't working hard enough, you didn't go home, you had to stay later. A real sweetheart.



Some longshoremen horsing around for the camera, Pier C, Hoboken, ca. 1965.

THE HOOK— AND OTHER WORK GEAR

We had to buy our own hooks. Well, the big hook that I had—if you were on the waterfront with the guys [you needed it to move cargo]—I always kept it on my belt, [even] when I'd be driving the car. But this one day, I take it off my belt, and I throw it on the floor. So don't you think that a cop car [stopped me] because my back light was broken? When the cop saw that hook, the shithead took it. I should have told him, "You have a gun for work. And that's what I have—the hook."

And we had [smaller ones], bag hooks, just for the bags. [If we had red-hot peppers in bags] you would nip that and just put it down, because the dust from that would get in your eyes.

You know, for a time, I had that—like a girdle [to protect my back]. I always wore the steel-toed boots, and gloves. We had to buy those, too.

[But yeah, sometimes guys got hurt.] I remember a guy—he took the pallet to drop it down, but the pallet hit his leg and a big chunk of his skin, so they called an ambulance. It was like a knife.

Opposite: *Hold gang, moving bags of red peppers—before they put on their masks to guard against the dust, ca. 1969.*

THE BANANA PIER

[Before my time on the docks, the bananas] were all loose, and the guys would have a strap on their shoulder [to carry them]. And they were in bundles—big stalks. But when I got there, they came in boxes.

The shitting bananas—that was the worst. Three decks, the top and then the bottom. It was holds [filled] with bananas. [And no, I don't have pictures of any bananas.] I knew them without a picture!

Because I had a D-card, I was always ordered to the hull picking up the bananas. The D-card is a low card. There was A, B, C, D. I think there was another card after that.

In those days, you were ordered out to different piers. Thank God I had a card at that time. When they would call



AT THE PIER

up and they would tell me where I had to go, I had to go there. I'd check in there and then I'd work there. All different piers.

I had a big sheet, which I kept, of where I worked, like straight time, when I worked overtime, and then, the golden hour. There was different pay at that time. It was more money.

But most of the time, because I was being ordered there, on the stinking bananas, I took myself off the guarantee. Then I went to the hall. When the bosses came in there [and announced the work for the day], I picked my own job—but not in the hold. I got just the terminal labor jobs.

[I took jobs that were] just up to 5:00 [at night]. If I wanted to work more, I could've. It depended where you worked. At times, maybe you'd work until 9:00 at night. But I just got in the car and “bye bye.” Then I passed the banana pier, and I thought to myself, “The poor guys—they're breaking their backs down there.”

[What was a good day?] Just to get home.

Opposite top: *Photo of Holland America Line, Fifth Street Pier, River and Fifth Streets, Hoboken, ca. 1958. Red took this photo from a ship.*

Opposite bottom: *Photo of S.S. Savannah in Hoboken, ca. 1960.*

Overleaf top: *Photo of Port Authority Pier B, Hoboken, ca. 1965.*

Overleaf bottom: *Photo of the cargo ship, S.S. Crna Gora, moored at Pier D, in Hoboken, ca. 1965. When asked why he took the photo, Red replied, “I just liked the angle.” He took the photo from on a lighter—a barge—positioned near the pier.*





IN THE HOLD

Photo of long-shoremen loading up a ship on the south side of Port Authority Pier 3 (now Pier A), ca. 1965. A "checker" is listing what has been loaded, including bags of mail, which must go on top.



*Below:
Unloading barrels from a ship's hold, ca. 1969.*





Gang members, including hatch boss Leo Porcelli, with barrels in the hold of a ship, ca. 1960. A member of the International Longshoremen's Association Local No. 2, Red's wages ranged over the years from two dollars an hour to eighteen dollars an hour.



Unloading crates from the hold of a ship, ca. 1969. In a single day, a gang might unload copper ingots, coffee, rolls of newsprint, bags of mail, or Italian marble—each with its own perils. Or as Red once put it: “If you weren’t careful, the marble slabs became marble chips.”



In the hold: steel is going to be unloaded, ca. 1970.

Steel being unloaded using a hi-low, ca. 1970.



PALLETIZING



Above: Photo of longshoremen moving bags off the ship and palletizing them. The hi-low would follow, to take the pallets inside the terminal, where they would be stacked for the trucks.

Opposite top: Photo of longshoremen in a pier shed at Pier C, waiting to load cargo on trucks, ca. 1960.

Opposite bottom: Photo of trucks arriving at Pier C, the foot of Fourth Street, to pick up cargo, ca. 1958. A "checker" would stand behind the truck and list what the men were loading into it. Today the process is computerized.

TERMINALS AND TRUCKS



ON THE WATERFRONT

[What do I think when I see On the Waterfront?]
I enjoy it. I recognize a lot of the guys that were in that movie.



Hoboken Historical Museum

On the Waterfront was shot in Hoboken in the winter of 1953 and used a lot of local longshoremen as extras. Red took this photo when Marlon Brando returned for the film's screening at the Fabian Theater in Hoboken in 1955.

From left: Joey Lisa, Marlon Brando, "Dice."

DEMOLITION ON RIVER AND HUDSON STREETS

[I took these pictures around 1968 and 1969, when several blocks of River and Hudson Streets were demolished to build Marine View Towers. All these buildings came down.] Nelson's Bar—the tavern—that was on the corner [of River and Third]. Frankie Nelson was the owner. He used to be a fighter.



Postcard for Nelson's Marine Bar & Grill, 300 River Street, Hoboken, featuring a cartoon of the Lightweight Champion of New Jersey. Hoboken Historical Museum Collection. Born Michael Valerio, boxer Frankie Nelson adopted an Irish name to ease his entry into professional boxing. He boxed from 1909 until 1921. Just after Prohibition ended, in 1933, he opened his tavern on River Street. Nelson died in 1971, three years after the bar was demolished.

I went there, [to Nelson's, but] I didn't drink that much. In fact, I didn't drink alcohol at all until I was in my thirties. Like even in the Army, I didn't drink or smoke. I just didn't. But my brother did: the first thing, he would wake up and his feet were on the floor, a cigarette in his mouth.



Photo of River Street, between Third and Fourth Streets, Hoboken, prior to demolition, 1969. A sign for Nelson's Marine Bar & Grill can be seen on the left; Keane's Tavern is in the center.



Photo of the demolition of Nelson's Marine Bar & Grill, 1969.

[So when I went to Nelson's or any other bar] I just had a soda. Nelson's was on the corner, and this was Patty Keane's [Keane's Tavern, at 304 River Street]. He had the brogue, Patty. It was hard to understand him. And his wife, too. She was nice. [I don't know where they went when they tore all this down. Patty didn't start another bar in town.]



Advertising pin for Meyer's Hotel, ca. 1895-1910. Hoboken Historical Museum collection. And, postcard of Meyer's Hotel, Hoboken, N.J. "Known the World Over," ca. 1930. Established at the end of the 19th century, Meyer's welcomed travelers and hosted community events and weddings for more than 70 years.



Meyer's Hotel, on the corner of Hudson and Third, was also demolished in 1969.

[This is another block that was demolished on River Street.] Harry's was the clothing store. I think I bought my hooks there.

The demolition didn't bother me at all. No. *(Laughs.)* There's no tears.



Harry's, 230 River Street, Hoboken, sold menswear, work clothes, uniforms, and was an outfitter for seamen.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF MARINE VIEW TOWERS

Groundbreaking ceremony for Marine View development, Fourth and River Streets, Hoboken, May 14, 1973. Left to right: Unidentified; Mayor Steve Capiello; Louis DePascale, president Hoboken City Council; unidentified.



Preparing for the construction of Marine View Towers, Hudson and Fourth Streets, ca. 1973.



Building the foundation for Two Marine View Towers, Port Authority Piers (since demolished) in the background, ca. 1973.



Marine View Towers, ca. 1974.

RETIREMENT—IN HOBOKEN

Containerization—it just happened overnight. Yeah, one, two, three. At the end, [the union] had a buy-out. I took the first buy-out, in 1989.

[Do I go down to the waterfront now?] Yeah. Just to get the breeze.



The Hoboken Oral History Project

“Vanishing Hoboken,” an oral history project, was initiated in 2000 by members of the Hoboken Historical Museum and the Friends of the Hoboken Public Library in response to dramatic physical, social, and economic changes in the city of Hoboken over the preceding twenty years, and to 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; 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 commute 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, in which 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 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 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. In 2001, with the support of the New Jersey Historical Commission, a division of the Department of State, the Oral History Project transcribed and edited several oral histories to produce a

series of “Vanishing Hoboken” chapbooks. Since 2002, twenty-seven chapbooks—including this one—have been published, with the support of the Historical Commission; the New Jersey Council for the Humanities, a state partner of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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 *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, in Western Europe and in North America. Most chapbooks were 5x4 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.





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