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Recollections of Tom Hanley



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

Vanishing Hoboken

The Hoboken Oral History Project

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I always loved being a longshoreman.

I was always proud of being a longshoreman.

Because I’m gonna tell you about longshoremen,

they were the dregs of society, but there were

a lot of good men. Like when I was

a young kid and I’d start to go astray,

they would try to steer me in the right direction.

“Hey. Kid. Come here. I wanna talk to you.”

There were a lot of good men.

**—Tom Hanley
October 14, 2016**



Introduction

Tom Hanley worked as a longshoreman for fifty-two years, starting out as a teenager on the Hoboken piers. “My whole family were longshoremen,” he explained during his oral history interview. He grew up proud of the way dockworkers stood up for each other, that sense of solidarity.

But he was also fully aware of the dangers of the job—most especially the violence perpetrated by the corrupt union bosses and mobsters who had seized control of the Port of New York and New Jersey. In 1939, when Tom was four months old, his father, a longshoreman on New York’s West Side piers, had disappeared, and Tom was later told that his father had been killed by Irish gangsters who ran the West Side piers.

So began Tom’s lifelong opposition to the mob, and the greed and corruption that punished men who worked the docks.

The family moved across the Hudson River, to Hoboken’s Hudson Street, to start anew—but they were living a stone’s-throw from the working waterfront. From the back window of the tenement where he lived with his widowed mother and older brother, Tom could watch longshoremen loading and unloading ships. If he had been of age to join them, he “could have climbed down my fire escape and been at work,” Tom remembered. In front of his building, he watched armed bosses hold court at favorite bars. Over the years, as Tom and his brother ran wild in the street, he learned, as neighborhood kids did, *who* ran the Hoboken piers, and who they had *killed* in order to gain that control.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the goings-on in Hoboken were known to the general public, too. The corruption and violence at the Port of New York and New Jersey had been revealed in a series of prize-winning newspaper articles in the *New York Sun*, and they, in turn, inspired a screenplay, *On the Waterfront*. When screenwriter Budd Schulberg and director Elia

Kazan shot their film in Hoboken in the winter of 1953, they cast then-fourteen-year-old Tom Hanley in the role of Tommy, the young boy who kills the pigeons raised by Marlon Brando's character, Terry Malloy, after learning that Terry has agreed to testify before a waterfront crime commission.

Not long after, Tom took his place on the waterfront as a longshoreman. In the late 1950s, the men working on the Hoboken piers were still moving cargo much as dockworkers had done for generations—using hooks and strong backs and following the directions of stevedores to load and unload crates and bags and pallets of goods. Tom's generation of longshoremen would be the last to handle cargo this way.

By the late 1960s-early 1970s, cargo would be containerized, and the old piers in Hoboken, which could not accommodate the huge cranes and massive yards the new process required, would become obsolete. Tom would go to work in Bayonne, New Jersey, where the cargo containers could be lifted with heavy equipment directly from ships to eighteen-wheelers or train cars. "I was a crane operator," he explained. "That's what I wanted. I was an experienced deck man." He adjusted well to the changes brought by containerization and technology—and he continued to resist what had *not* changed: the corruption and violence on the waterfront that stole of lives and livelihoods of longshoremen.

Tom Hanley was interviewed by Robert Foster and Holly Metz on October 14, 2016, in a conference room at the Shipyard complex on Hudson Street, Hoboken. 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.

I Can't Go Back Any Further Than My Two Grandmothers

Well, here's the thing. My family [history]—I can't go back any further than my two grandmothers. I had two wonderful grandmothers. Both of them, if you asked about your grandfather, they said, "He was a bum. He left." So I assume he was a drunk. I just assume that. Whatever it was, he left. He walked out.

My mother's mother lived in Jersey City, and she was from Poland. My father's mother lived in Hoboken—forever, I guess. We lived in Greenwich Village in the beginning of my life. That was 1939.

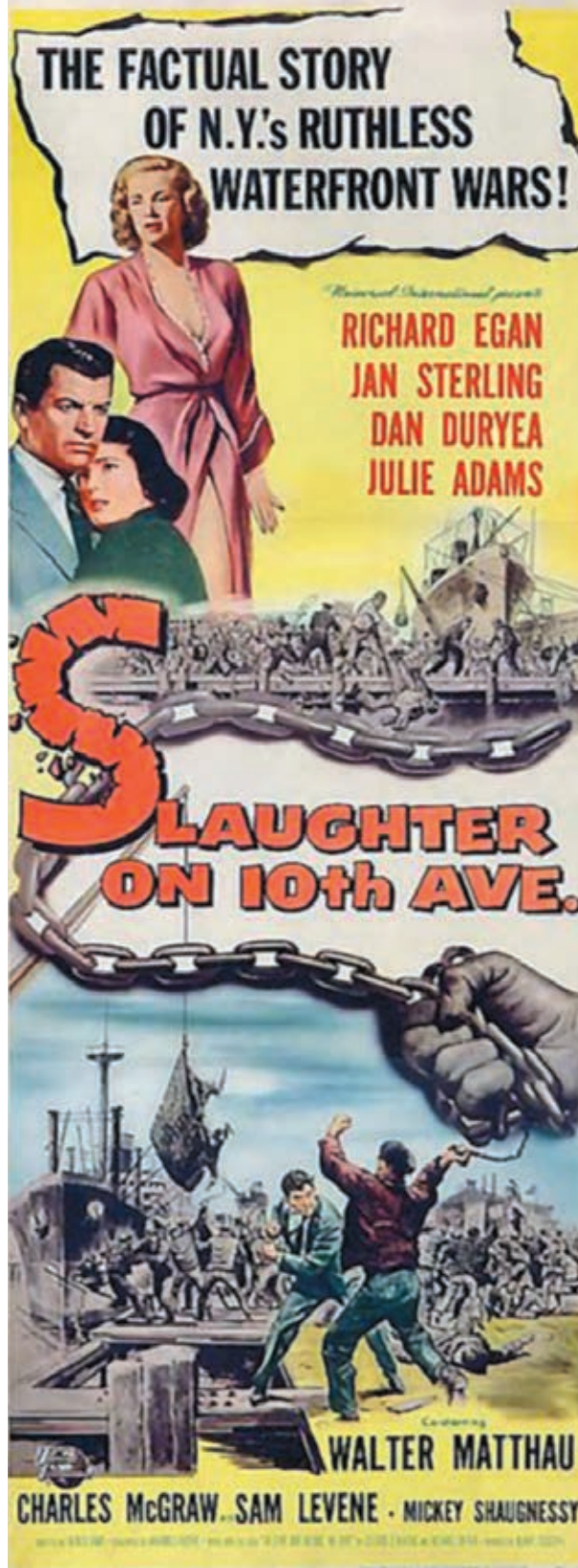
I was four months old when my father was murdered by Irish gangsters in Greenwich Village. My brother was six. We basically knew the people that murdered him, but—you know, [in] my family—you didn't get the right stories. You know what I mean? I heard my father got killed in the war, or heard this, or heard that. But he was threatened. He worked on the docks, on pier number forty-five. He was threatened. We don't know why he got killed. My father was a gambler. On the docks, people stole things, and maybe he stole something that somebody else thought belonged to them. We don't really know.

There were questions back then whether my father ran away. They never found his body. But my aunt, my mother's sister, who didn't really care for my father that much, always said to us, as kids, "Your father would never leave you. He loved you." So we knew that he didn't.

My father went to work one day, and he disappeared. Now you could have said he might have left because of being afraid of these people. He was warned. But I know for a fact—a friend of mine married a girl from [New York], and her father was an old burglar from the Village. He told me who murdered my father, and the people who murdered my father eventually went to the electric chair for another murder. They probably killed about thirty-fourty guys.

RIGHT: Movie poster for *Slaughter on 10th Avenue*, 1957.

BELOW: Paperback cover of William Keating's *The Man Who Rocked the Boat*, ca. 1956.



Slaughter on Tenth Avenue

They made a movie out of this story—[about the other murder. William Keating first described it in his autobiography, *The Man Who Rocked the Boat*. Keating was an assistant district attorney in the 1940s and early 1950s, and then counsel to the New York City Anti-crime Committee.] The movie they made was called *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*. It was about the murder of this hiring agent. [He was the person who chose which longshoremen would get work each day on the pier, when they assembled in the morning for the “shape up.”]

Now back in those days, the hiring agents were all tough guys; they would just knock you out in a heartbeat. [The killers] must have tried to take this guy’s pier over, and he told them to get lost. They waited outside for him and they shot him—but he lived for about three weeks. He was in St. Vincent’s Hospital in New York. Now, nobody would tell him that he was going to die. He had a friend who was a police lieutenant, and one day the police lieutenant said, “Listen. I’m going to tell you the truth. You’re going to die. Are you going to let this scum get away with this?” So he identified them, and that was one of the worst things that could happen to [someone accused of murder]: They brought you in and the guy identified you on his deathbed.

[So Keating went after] these guys, and there was all kinds of pressure from the union, the politicians, the church even—trying to pressure [him] not to pursue the case. But he kept at it, and eventually convicted these guys. Two of them went to the electric chair. Even after they were in the death house in Sing Sing, there were people trying to get them out.

Later on—I’ve done a lot of homework on the mob, the Irish mob, because I’ve always been opposed to them. So I’ve read a lot of books. [The film] *On the Waterfront* came out of this series of [New York Sun] articles by Malcolm Johnson. I went to the library and I photo-stated all those articles.



• Aerial photograph of Standard Brands building (Lipton Tea), where Tom's mother sometimes worked, 1951. New Jersey State Archives photo collection.

I went back and read a lot of books, like [the one by] Bill Keating. There was a lot of information there. They were trying to take over that pier. But that pier had a lot of rebels—a lot of young guys who were behind the hiring agent, and they would stick up for him. So [the killers] were being careful. They probably picked out a few people to murder, so they could put the fear of God in these people.

She Struggled

[So my father was gone. And] Mom had a four-month-old and a six-year-old. She struggled. She did the best she could. Mom could make a meal out of a nickel. She would make soups and stuff. But we were destitute. Only when we were really backed against the wall would my mother go and ask for welfare. A few times we were on welfare. But my mother wouldn't [just] go and ask.

We had a cold-water flat. We had a kerosene stove [and] no kerosene. Sometimes the gas and electric would be shut off. That's how we lived. But she did the best she could. She tried. [She moved us here, to Hoboken, from New York, to get work, and she knew she'd have help looking after us,] because my grandmother lived in the same building. Even though my grandmother was blind, she could watch over us. We lived on the third floor, and she lived on the top floor.

My mother worked in the Lipton Tea building. I think it was probably Tender Leaf Tea then, but probably Lipton owned Tender Leaf Tea at that time. But [there wasn't a regular income. My mother] went from job to job. She had rheumatic fever and she developed a heart problem, so she would periodically lose her job by not showing up for three or four days. And me and my brother literally ran in the streets.

105 Hudson Street

[We lived at] 105 Hudson Street, a tenement, right across from where the police station is now. Now that street, at the time, had twenty-one bars on it. Each side of the tenement [where we lived] had a bar. And we knew everybody in the building. Some were longshoremen. Some had other jobs. And they were all struggling, let's put it that way.

It's funny—when they were tearing all those buildings down [on Hudson and River Streets, in 1969], they had it all taped off. I went in my building just to look at it one more time. Same holes were in the walls, but I used to think it was bigger than it was. It was really small. The kitchen was only like this little thing. We had [what] looked like a fireplace, and probably at one time was for a coal stove—but we didn't have that. We had a bathroom that had a tub, and we had a water heater that you used to have to light. But we had a tub and a bathroom in the house—a lot of people didn't. We had a dining room, which was also [where] we had a sleeping couch. That was where the kerosene stove was—but it only heated that room. So when you got up, you got up and ran to that room.

• *Newspaper clipping, "Local Boy Is In Movie Being 'Shot' in Hoboken," shows Tom and his mother, Mildred, in their apartment at 105 Hudson Street, 1953. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.*



EXPLAINS—Tommy Hanley, Hoboken boy hired to act in movie being filmed about waterfront, tells his mother, Mrs. Mildred Hanley, about his part in a scene.

Lenses Capture Roofs, Streets

Local Boy Is in Movie Being 'Shot' in Hoboken

Hoboken residents who want to watch a glamorous Hollywood set in action and possibly get a job as an extra will have an opportunity Monday morning when a professional camera begins shooting pictures in the streets.

The company, producing a picture called "Waterfront" has a budget of \$100,000 and a cast of 50 working on rooftops for the past five days. Most of the film will be "shot" in Hoboken during the 10 remaining working days allotted to the production.

LOCAL BOY IN CAST

Among the stars working under the direction of Eric Keenan are Marlon Brando, Eva Marie Saint, Earl Brickman and Lee Cobb. The script, the story of sailors, was local boy, Tommy Hanley, 14, of 105 Hudson St., Hoboken, has already "broken" into the cast.

at a salary of \$20 a week. Hanley, who lives with 8 children, mother, Mrs. Mildred Hanley, who had lived in the region and later got her meals.

Most of the work so far has been done on the rooftops—houses on Hudson Street, between Newark and 1st Streets, Central and nearby work in Jersey City, center of operations of the production.

DINING ROOM CONVERTED

A dining room in the former Meyers Hotel has been converted for use of the restaurant and of which workers and five sets rooms in the hotel are used for technical work and for the main set.

The story, written by Ben Rosenburg, is said to be the same tough dockworkers and it stars Brando and Miss Saint.

I Knew We Weren't Like Other People

I didn't really feel like I was poor. But I knew we weren't like other people. And I'll tell you the truth—I went to Catholic school here, and here's the thing. When you're in Catholic school here in Hoboken—there were like four levels of economy. There were the doctors and lawyers and politicians' daughters—which I always fell in love with, the pretty ones with the nice dresses. And there was the next level down, [and then another]. I was on the lowest level.

And you know, I've had to review my life pretty good, and I've had to look at a lot of things, and own up to a lot of things. They talk about pride: it's a killer.

I remember my pride, in the second grade. They used to have these little bottles of milk. They were like six cents. When everybody [who] ordered milk got theirs, and there were leftovers, they would give it to the poor kids. You know, my tongue would be hanging out for that milk, but I wouldn't take it. Because I would say, "I'm not poor."

I Believed In A Punishing God

I have to say that I got a good foundation

[in Catholic school], some sort of a foundation. The only thing is, I believed in a punishing god—that I was bad, I was inherently bad, and I could never be as good as the Catholics demanded. So I might as well be bad. And I was.

I started to act up in the fifth or sixth grade. I always tell people that my alcoholism started when I was twelve, before I ever really drank: My acting out. I started to do things that I would never do before. I started stealing cars. I started doing a lot of stuff. I was getting a lot of messages at home about doing the right thing, but that's not what I was seeing.

You Kept Your Dirty Laundry At Home

And in seventh grade, I was asked to leave St. Peter & Paul [Catholic school]. Now, people didn't go around broadcasting what the situation was at home, because you kept your dirty laundry at home. But they wanted me to leave, and they asked to see my mother. My mother took me up and—the first time I'd ever seen her [do this]—she said, “Well, he doesn't have a father. There's no man in the house, and I can't control him.” You know what the nun said to her? Not in a mean-nun way. She said, “You leave him here. We'll take care of him.” And she meant it. “We'll watch over him. We'll take care of him.”

Now I have guys that I help in recovery, they hate the nuns, because the nuns beat the shit out of them and stuff like that. But my nuns in St. Peter & Paul—and this is all in hindsight—were wonderful. They were very good to me. They were kind and loving. (Well, I did have one nun who was nuts, and she needed a good beating herself. That was in the fifth grade.)

So they said, “We'll take care of him; we'll nurture him.” But I didn't stay. By that time, I wanted to go to public school. I was sick and tired of being in the same class all the time, fifty kids in the same class—like I told you, four different levels of economy. You, with holes in your shoes.

[I was able to leave because] I had complete control over my mother. I manipulated her. I told her, “I'm not going back to this school. If you send me back to that school, I'm not going.”

Now my brother [would not have wanted me to leave school.] He was six years older than me. I was afraid of him. He was like my caretaker, and he was good to me. But by this time, my brother was in the Army, so I didn't have that threat over me. They put me in David E. Rue School, [the public grammar school]. The first day I went in there, it was like culture shock. They were throwing things at the

teacher. It was a madhouse. I was terrified. I said, “What did I get myself into?”

But you know what? It wasn't long before I was riding with that pack. I didn't even have to study, because what we had in Catholic school in the fifth grade, they were getting in the public school in seventh grade. And I was smart. I was a good speller, I was a good reader. So I didn't have to study. I really went nuts there.

On the Waterfront: The Audition

So one day I go up on the roof, and this guy is building a pigeon coop. And I asked him, “What are you doing on my roof?” *My roof!* We probably hadn't paid the rent in six months—and I'm fourteen years old. “What are you doing on my roof?” He said, “Well, we're going to make a movie here. I'm making a pigeon coop.” And he hires me to feed the pigeons—because, I think, he's worried about his pigeon coop being there the next time he comes back.

But he was a great guy—and an absolute drunk. Every day afterward he would be downstairs drinking, and all day long he would drink Fleischmann's and a beer. His name was Brownie. I had a good gig with him, because he was a drunk, and he wouldn't remember [if he paid me]. So he would say to me, “Did I pay you for the pigeons' food?” and I would say no. So I'd get paid maybe three times a week, and I was only supposed to get a bag once a week.

Anyway, Brownie was working with the movie company [that was making *On the Waterfront* in Hoboken.] He'd taken [screenwriter] Budd Schulberg around the piers in New York, going to the bars and stuff, getting material. How he did that I don't know—because you don't do that in New York.

• Still from *On the Waterfront*, 1954. Tommy, played by Tom Hanley, approaches Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando, on the roof where Terry keeps his pigeons. The coop had been installed on Tom's roof. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



And Brownie was a rebel. He was with the AFL [American Federation of Labor], which was against the ILA [International Longshoremen's Association]. So he was not well liked by the guys on the West Side. But he was a union man. He knew that the ILA was crooked, and he wanted to go on the other side. One time they just rebelled, and they shut down the whole [New York] port. Later on they had a vote, [between the AFL and the ILA], and the ILA won—but only by a short margin. But all the guys who were AFL, they were blackballed—including Brownie]. He had his nose busted a few times, and I heard he was thrown in the river a couple of times, too.

But it turns out that Brownie had worked with my father in New York. He keeps saying to me, "I knew your father in New York. He was a good guy, he was a standup guy," this and that. "I'm going to get you in this movie." I'm thinking to myself, "This guy is full of shit. He's got no pull."

Sure enough, one day he gives me money and says, "I want you to go over to the Actors' Studio on 52nd Street." [That's where they're going to audition me.] I go over there by myself, because my mother is incapable of doing anything.

I went up there, and I'm sitting in this office, outside, [where] there's a receptionist. Then they take me in this room that's like a little theater, a little auditorium. [To see if they could get a dramatic scene out of me, the director, Elia] Kazan starts to tease me about my father being a squealer: "Is that why your father got murdered? Because he was a squealer?" And I go insane! I start throwing punches at them. I was throwing chairs at them. But that was what they wanted to see. They wanted to get me angry. [Because there was a scene in the movie where the character would cry out of anger.] And you know what? When I was a kid, I couldn't cry unless I was in a rage. Because you didn't dare cry. At any rate, that was his way—Kazan—and I got the job.



• On the set of *On the Waterfront*, from left to right: Marlon Brando (Terry Malloy); Tom's cousin Ronald Clark; (standing) Hoboken Police Commissioner Arthur Marotta; Eva Marie Saint (Edie Doyle); Thomas Hanley (Tommy); director Elia Kazan, 1953. Photo courtesy of Tom Hanley.

Making the Movie

When they go to the superintendent of schools to get me out of school for two weeks, the superintendent said, “This guy don’t even go to school, and you want him to get out of school for two weeks?” But they let me go.

[And they not only filmed some of the movie on our roof but also inside our building, in the apartment above ours. The people living there let them use it.] That apartment is the same apartment as mine—[the same layout. The crew] painted it to bring it down, to make it age. It was bad enough, but these people had gotten married and they had painted it, and it was pretty decent. So they painted it. Later on, when the people moved back in, they had to paint over that stuff a lot of times before it would go away.

But next to that apartment was my grandmother’s apartment. In fact, it was funny—when they were making the movie, my grandmother used to listen to the soaps on the radio. She was blind, but she was also half deaf. So they were trying to get my grandmother to lower the radio. And she’s saying, “Go to hell.” [Laughs.]

• *Preparing to shoot a scene from On the Waterfront on a Hudson Street rooftop, Marlon Brando foreground, 1953. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.*



• *Marlon Brando poses with Tom’s mother, Mildred, and Tom, 1953. Photo courtesy of Tom Hanley.*

Method Acting

Each time that I was doing a scene, Kazan would sit with me. And he’d say to me, “Do you think you can do this?” and I’d say, “No, I don’t think I can.” And he’d say, “Well, I think you can do it.” And he’d sit with me, and he’d talk to me, and he’d say, “This is what I want you to do.”

The scene where I throw a pigeon at Marlon Brando [was important, so] they went to my mother and said, “We want him to do this scene, and we want to get him agitated and make him cry and stuff like that. Do you think we can coax him a little bit?”—like, knock me around a little. And she said, “Well, that’s up to him. You talk to him.” So I said, “Let’s go for it.”

What they did was—you know the roof kiosks they have? Where you come out on the roof? Well, they put me in there with this cop that lived next door to me. He’s in the movie, the cop—Pete King. I hated his guts and he hated mine. They put us in the room, in that thing together, and we went at it. I almost bit his thumb off. Then they threw me out, to do the scene. And they kept making me repeat it.

These People Were Supportive To Me

RIGHT: Marquee case at the Fabian Theater, Hoboken, advertising *On the Waterfront*, 1955. Photo by Mel Kiernan, in the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

BELOW: Marquee at the Fabian Theatre in Hoboken, showing a local screening of *On the Waterfront*, ca. January 1955. Photo by Mel Kiernan, in the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



People were telling me, “You did a great job!” And you know what? I didn’t believe them. See, that’s one of my problems. I don’t believe it when people tell me good things about myself. Now I do. But people tell me they love me, I don’t believe it. You know what I mean? Because that wasn’t said in my house.

I didn’t like myself there. I didn’t think I was tough enough. I wanted to be tough. I really wasn’t. I adapted to my situation, and I became tough. I became hardened, because I thought that was what you had to do to get by. But now I’ve softened.

In hindsight—you look back and you say, “These people were supportive to me.” I didn’t know how to receive that. I mistrusted everybody. I thought they were all gay. They used to call one another “Honey” and “Sweetheart,” and I said, “What is it with these people?” But they were good to me. The guy that was the makeup man was very supportive to me. He was one of the guys who said to me, “Listen, don’t pay any attention to all that Honey and Sweetheart stuff.”

[How did being in the movie change my life?] The money they paid me came at just the right time, [because] we were literally starving to death, me and my mom. I only worked two weeks, but still and all—\$250 a week in 1953 is like half a million to us. We were able to pay our rent, our back rent, put the gas and electric on, and probably lived for the year on that.

But to tell you the truth, I think I suffered more from it than anything. First of all, the girls were chasing me, but I was shy. I didn’t know how to handle it. So they thought I was stuck-up, and that went around.

Then, by the time I went to high school, and not having any clothes to wear—and half the time I didn’t go—I didn’t want to go, because of all the hazing and teasing and stuff like that. So I really didn’t want to go to high school. I did go to Demarest [High School] for a short period of time, but I hardly went. Then I quit, at sixteen, and I went to work.

Going to Work

●
*Keuffel & Esser Co.
building at Fourth and
Adams Streets, Hoboken,
ca. 1960. Collection of
the Hoboken Historical
Museum.*



First I worked in the cafeteria at Keuffel & Esser [the instruments manufacturer on Adams Street in Hoboken]. I was a dishwasher, but I also used to wait on the counter, and in the afternoon I [would fill up] the coffee machines and soda machines. Of course, I found a way to filch money out of there. So it was a good gig. Eventually, I think I got caught stealing, and I left.

I went to work at a bookbinder on Fifth and Park, next. [It was located next to the library, but we did jobs] for everybody. It was hard work. The guy who owned the place was a guy named Barone—that's an old Hoboken name. Anyway, he was a taskmaster, but he was a decent guy. I was working there, I don't know how long. I was just getting ready to turn seventeen, and I had this thing in my mind about going on the docks, but I was too young.

So I went in to ask for a raise, which I thought I was entitled to at the time, and he said, "No can do." So I said, "I quit." Then I forged my papers, and I went to work on the docks.

Now, I didn't know that I was going to get away with it. We used to take these old papers, and we'd put in what we wanted to put in. So I made myself eighteen. In those days you had to go to the Coast Guard first, on Governor's Island, and you had to get a pass [from them]. That was the first step. After you got the Coast Guard pass, you went to the waterfront. I knew that when I got through the Coast Guard I had a good shot, but I still thought I was going to get caught. And then one day I got my waterfront card.

The Murphy Brothers

In those days you had to have a connection.

I had a connection—the Murphy brothers. [I knew them] from the neighborhood. They owned the bar across the street from where I lived—the Blue Haven. I wasn't thinking about any favors or anything like that; I knew the system. Because if you take, then you're in there. I used to think I had good luck, but now I think I had good God; that so many incidents were—I could have taken the bait. I'm not saying I was so smart and all. I knew certain things to stay away from. This comes from street sense. But I could have been desperate enough to take one of them jobs, and then be owing to the powers-that-be.

[Lots of other people did it, though. The Murphy Brothers would hang out in front of their bar and] everybody came there looking for jobs. They would leave gifts, they would leave guns, they would leave expensive boxes of cigars. And they were always outside, the Murphys. Big Willie, with the cigar, and the middle brother, Francis; he was the nutty one.

Francis was an alcoholic, and if they were after you, he would shoot at you in the street—and get away with it. They had connections all over the place. The other brother, Mike, was the silent and deadly type. They found him in his apartment, dead. They didn't know if he was murdered or committed suicide. [But] I liked Willie. Willie was a fair guy. He was the oldest, and he was the smartest.

So I had my connection. And the hiring agent was McNamara. He was the guy they put in after they killed another guy that was the hiring agent. Anyway, McNamara liked me—because he was in the same boat as I was. He had [only] his mother [to raise him]. He took care of her. He knew that I took care of my mother. So he always hired me.



• From an article in *Look* magazine about waterfront corruption in Hoboken, 1951. From the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum. The caption read: “Longshoremen scatter as ‘shape-up’ breaks. For jobs on the docks, many are called, few are chosen.”

The First Day I Got Hired

[I lived] right around the corner [from the docks]. I could have climbed down my fire escape and been at work. Just like Terry Malloy [the character Marlon Brando plays in *On the Waterfront*—I could have jumped off the roof [to get there].

The first day I got hired, I was as tall as I am now, and about 160 pounds. [Skinny.] I get on the pier, right? I've got my hook, and I've got my gloves. They sent me to this gang, and I saw a guy who was my neighbor. Now I'm seventeen, and they're like twenty-four, twenty-five. They're all my brother's friends. My brother's already working on the docks. They said to me, “You with us?” Yeah, yeah.

They got their set up. They got an ashcan full of ice and beer. They've got cold cuts from Fiore's. So they say, “Sit down. Sit down.” It's not my time to work yet, because they're on a loading ship. I don't start working until the discharge. In those days, there were twenty-one men in a gang—that was a regular gang. When they had a discharge ship—that's all the stuff coming in—they would hire an extra eight men.

So we're on the loading ship for like two hours. Now, the loading shift is easier [but I don't know that]. I'm sitting there, I'm saying, “Wow, this is some job. I'm with my buddies, I'm with my neighborhood.”

[And then] they say, “Okay, get your coat. We're going on the other ship.” Now I'm dragging my ass. [The discharge shift is] tough work. I'm picking up marble chips, and breaking drums. A guy comes around and says, “We're working until 11:00.” I said, “I can't take it until 6:00!” But you know, in those days, you could not tell a guy you were going home. Because if you told him you were going home, he didn't put you to work for a week.

A Little Crazy

[How did the other guys react to me working on the docks after being in *On the Waterfront*?] That was even tougher [than what happened to me in high school]. They would tease me. “Whaddaya think, you’re a movie star?” “Hey, Mr. Hollywood.” If I let them get too far, then they would start abusing me.

But I had the double-whammy. A couple guys I hit with a little crowbar. Then they know, “Leave him alone. He’s a little crazy.” Even though I was skinny—I didn’t hit them with my hands. Then they leave you alone. It’s just like if you go to jail. If you don’t fight, you’re in trouble.

● Pier B, Hoboken, ca. 1965. Photo by Hoboken longshoreman Donald “Red” Barrett, from the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

● OPPOSITE TOP: Photo by Hoboken longshoreman Donald “Red” Barrett, from the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.



Irish Piers and Italian Piers

At that time, when I started [in 1956], they were all American Exports Lines [piers in Hoboken]. They built those piers specifically for them. [And in Hoboken, the piers were mostly divided up by ethnic background. I’m Irish-American, and] A and B were mostly my piers. Pier C was basically an Italian pier. It was a different Local, and the Murphys didn’t see eye-to-eye with them, and they didn’t see eye-to-eye with the Murphys.

[But there were exceptions to the rule on who worked where.] “Red” Barrett, [a longshoreman who took photos of the docks during the 1950s and 60s], worked mostly on Pier C. He was Irish, but he was related to somebody that was Italian, who worked on that pier.

Everything Was By Hand

When I went to work on the waterfront, everything was by hand. And there was a method to it. You know, they used to tell us that we were dumb donkeys, but the truth of the matter is that we were very skilled at what we did. It was dangerous, it was hard work, and the people knew what they were doing. Everything had to be laid out. The [goods for the] last port out were on the bottom. Then they made floors out of cargo, they put dunnage—[scrap wood to secure cargo during transportation]—on top of it. They made another floor. Sometimes they put cars on top of that floor.



• Longshoremen in the hold of a ship moored on the south side of Pier A, ca. 1970s. Photo by Hoboken longshoreman Donald “Red” Barrett, from the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

• OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Photo by Hoboken longshoreman Donald “Red” Barrett, from the collection of the Hoboken Historical Museum.

[Who decided what went where?] Well, they knew what the cargo was—the stevedores. Everybody thinks a longshoreman is a stevedore, [but] a stevedore is the guy who lays out the ship. We had stevedores that hung out in the park across the way, [or in the bar,] but they would have the hatch bosses come running and say, “This is what I want you to do. This is what I want you to put there. You take this, you take that.” And they were skilled at it. Once the stevedore got his plan, he gives it to a planning clerk, and the planning clerk runs it up. He has the plan, then he dictates what’s going where. Some of these guys, even though we were not buddies with Brooklyn—they imported from Brooklyn, because they were good at what they did.

The O.K. Corral

I got married at twenty-one and moved to Union City, which was a step up at the time. I lived in Union City for like eleven years or so. A lot of trouble in those eleven years. A lot of trouble. Then I worked my way out of all that.

I used to have a nephew. We'd all be sitting around the Thanksgiving table, and he'd say, "Tell us some stories, Uncle Tommy," and I was telling them about the place we used to hang around, where people used to come, where it was like gunfire at the O.K. Corral. They'd come in looking for action, and they usually got it. They'd get locked in, and the baseball bats would come out, and the guns. So I would tell my nephew some of these stories—and it's like straight out of *Goodfellas*, right? Then after I finished, I would tell him, "Chuck, don't believe a word I said. I have a great imagination." And he said, "You're full of shit! You were there!" But I wasn't the real tough guy. The guys I was with were the real tough guys. I'm like in the middle. Sometimes I was in a blackout when I did these things. Then I'd wake up, and I've got people lookin' to kill me!

But you know what? I tell people—alcohol enabled me to live the life I was living at the time. It enabled me to cope with what I had to cope with. [People all around me were doing the same.] I've seen guys get killed on the docks, [falling down after drinking,] down in the hold. Longshoremen are in the bar at six o'clock in the morning, and they go to work.

A New Container Pier in Bayonne—and A New Local

[Then] my wife and her sister found this house for sale out in North Arlington [and] we bought it. It was a two-family house. We moved out there in '72, and I went to work in the new container pier in Bayonne, Global's terminal. I opened the gates there. I was a crane operator; that's what I wanted. I was an experienced deck man. I was good at what I did. I already had the skills of running winches. I had the principles down [and then] they sent us to a two-week school. We loved it.

Now when I went over there, [to work in Bayonne,] the mob ran that Local. And I had a bit of a reputation from over here. Not that they were afraid of me. But they knew that they weren't just going to give me a beating, to shut my mouth. So, as long as you're not hurting them in the pocketbook—I was always verbal about the corruption in the union. I would get up in union meetings. Because if there was a job that I was supposed to get, you wouldn't get it because somebody would buy that job. That's what they were doing. They were selling jobs.

Listen. And I've told this to people. I worked on the docks fifty-two years. Every so many years there's a shake-up with the government. Somebody goes to jail—which I'm happy for. Somebody goes in the trunk of a car. And that's where they belong.

[After a while,] they were being investigated in Bayonne, and a few of them got locked up. And when the FBI took them out, I cheered. I clapped. [And then] the federal government came in, and I got elected to be the shop steward. I also became the recording secretary of the Local, [though] I didn't take a pay, which a lot of people do.

[But being] the shop steward was a headache, because these young kids don't know about unions. They don't stick up for one another. They couldn't care less about anybody else. They're only out for themselves. Whereas we stuck together here.

Years ago, longshoremen backed everybody up. Anybody got fired, we'd walk off the pier. I loved that. If the people in the office were having a problem, we walked off the job. You can't do it if a guy's stealing, but if he did something, and some horseshit superintendent fires him, everybody walks off the job. We go across the street to the bar. The boss comes over, he says, "Come back to work." "No. We ain't comin' back to work until Bob comes back to work." Guess what happens. The superintendent gets fired: "We don't need you. You're a labor problem." He gets fired. We go back to work.

[But that kind of solidarity,] it's a gone goose. My whole family were longshoremen. My uncle was a boss in New York, on the Grace Line. And in New York, on the West Side, they all backed one another. They all came from that neighborhood—Chelsea. You didn't dare go to work if they were walking out. You weren't going to work. The longshoremen would throw you in the river.



I always loved being a longshoreman. I was always proud of being a longshoreman. Because I'm gonna tell you about longshoremen, they were the dregs of society, but there were a lot of good men. Like when I was a young kid and I'd start to go astray, they would try to steer me in the right direction. "Hey. Kid. Come here. I wanna talk to you." There were a lot of good men. Longshoremen, they didn't make a lot of money. They worked two or three days. They were always generous, they'd always give to charity, they'd always give blood. That's the way they were. Not today.

And here's another thing I'll tell you. I've got two boys and a daughter. My daughter's always been great; never one ounce of trouble. My boys have given me a run for my money. And you know what? I still like the way they carry themselves—rather than these punks that we've got working on the piers now. They carry themselves well.

[Do I ever see the guys I knew from Hoboken?] They're all gone, most of them. They're mostly all gone. But that's okay. I've got lots of friends. I babysit three days a week. I love it. It keeps me young. I have a full life. I always tell people, "If I drop dead tomorrow"—not that I want to drop dead—"I've lived a rich, full life." I always say, "If you can look back and laugh about it, you got away with it."

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 OPPOSITE: *The family, at Tom's daughter's wedding, 2010.* FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Sons Sean and Michael Hanley, daughter Mara (nee Hanley) Brater, her husband Ian Brater, Tom's ex-wife Mary Neville Hanley, and Tom. Photo courtesy of Tom Hanley.

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, thirty 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 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, is a

...small, inexpensive, stitched tract formerly sold by itinerant dealers, or chapman, 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.



“I just remembered this two years ago,” Tom recalled. “You know where the train went into the station in Hoboken? I saved a kid’s life there. We used to go up on the roof, where the trains are, and run across. My friend fell down in between, and was on the wires. I pulled him off. We both could have been electrocuted.” Tom’s rescue made the news, and in 1947 was immortalized in an issue of New Heroic Comics, which illustrated “stories of truly heroic men and women, chosen by this publication for their daring actions in hazardous tasks.”



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

