

## About New York

# Step Right Up! See a Boardwalk! It's Coney Island!

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

The sultry air shimmers as syncopated bodies glide past. A woman in pink carrying a dripping ice cream cone, two scoops. An emaciated, mustachioed man with a million-dollar smile and a ponderous plastic bag of empty cans, a bargain-basement Burt Reynolds if there ever was one. Old women speaking Russian, teen-agers ambling through an endless summer, cotton-candy dreaming, hot dogs with the works.

Our view is from a stool in a saloon with no discernible name. Its entire front opens onto the Coney Island boardwalk. A deeply tanned seaman occupies the perch where floor merges with boardwalk. He wears a sailor's cap, a gold chain dangling a gold anchor and a huge belt buckle depicting the Statue of Liberty against a full-color American flag. He sips gin from a plastic cup, and he talks and talks and talks.

On falling from a window, "The first three floors are the hardest." On marital relations, "You gotta understand this woman made it so hard for her husband she drove him to drink and he didn't even drink." On military service, "Put it this way, when you're in the Army and you're in the stockade, you're an undesirable person."

Meandering out onto the boardwalk, we hear a fading but insistent voice, "I'm going to tell you a story that's hard to believe. . . ."



Not so hard to believe as our next stop. Coney Island U.S.A., on the boardwalk at West 12th Street. Hard to describe. With paraphernalia from Coney Island's glory days displayed in glass cases, it seems like a museum.

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But most museums don't have tattoo festivals, go-go dancing contests with fully clad contestants, concerts by groups like Formaldehyde Blues Train or plays starring a toy airplane as Charles Lindbergh.

Not to mention carnival barkers. We've come for the sideshow — in-

cluding a man called the Human Cigarette Factory who rolls with his toes, a sword swallower and a man who drives nails into his head with a hammer. Alas, we've arrived too early.

Luckily, Dick Zigun, the 36-year-old artistic director, and Valerie Haller, 30, company manager, are getting things ready. The conversation wanders a bit, but we particularly take to the story of how they met and started dating.

"My life had always been fringe and weird," says Ms. Haller, a designer by profession. And Coney Island figured prominently. Ms. Haller's grandparents met on the boardwalk, and she dated the man who operated the Cyclone roller coaster.

A friend of Ms. Haller read an article about Mr. Zigun graduating from Yale Drama School and coming to Coney Island to establish a multi-media fun house for avant-garde artists and out-of-work sideshow stars. Mr. Zigun successfully hustled the likes of the National Endowment for the Arts for financing and started a June parade attracting more than 500,000 people on sunny days.

"Why don't you go out with this guy?" the friend asked Ms. Haller. Why not indeed?

"All I had to do was bat my eyelashes," Ms. Haller recalled with a musical giggle.



At the western end of Coney Island is Seagate, a community behind guards and walls. With its Victorian houses and tree-lined streets, it contrasts sharply with the poverty and projects outside. We have come to hear the story of Frank Schubert's life.

This plain-spoken man started in lighthouses in 1937 "when jobs were at a premium." He first worked for the old Bureau of Lighthouses, then for the Coast Guard as a civilian employee. He has manned the 99-year-old beacon on the shores of Seagate since 1960. It is here, in a pleasant house, that Mr. Schubert and his wife, Marie, raised three children, weathered hurricanes, watched waves as tall as buildings.

He has made furniture from driftwood and doesn't know how many thousands of times he has climbed the 78 stairs to the top. He is 73 years old and buried his wife three years ago. The lighthouse, like most, is now almost completely automated, but Mr. Schubert has no plans to retire. "I'm the last of 'em," he said. "I'm the last civilian lighthouse keeper in the United States."

Like shifting sand, everything at Coney Island changes. A hotel in the shape of an elephant is a distant memory, the woman who raised a family beneath a roller coaster a bit nearer one. A friend went back to the old neighborhood last weekend and found a wall where the word "America" was long ago scrawled. Hitting it meant a home run in stickball. The word "Drugs" is there now.

Soon they'll be selling Nathan's hot dogs in Red Square. And in the nameless bar, the old salt holds forth. "I tell you I made up my own rules," he says. "I was what you call a pest."