

## Journey to an Unknown Shore

By Chip Brown September 12, 1986

The chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in.

-- Matthew 27:6-7

If you die in New York and no one claims your body, it is nailed in a coffin made of white New England pine and sent to Potter's Field aboard a small red ferry. The ferry ties up at a tumbledown dock in the Bronx. Potter's Field lies half a mile off, on a small wind-swept island not far from the seaside mansions of "The Great Gatsby." At the dock there's a shack where the ferrymen fry sausage and eggs. The morgue wagon arrives around 9. The gangway bustles with guards from the city Department of Corrections who review their manifests, and with prisoners from the city jail who bury the dead.

It's an eerie scene, perhaps because the image of a journey over water is ingrained in the iconography of death. The ferryman Charon is a fixture of Greek legend, running his "rust-hued vessel" across the river Styx, collecting his money from the mouths of the dead. And so there's more than meets the eye when the engines rumble to life, the deep shriek of the backing whistle pierces the air and the ferry glides off for a destination known simply as "the other side."

The passage is a quick trip across the gray-green strait. At 6 knots, the boat soon dwindles in the distance, and there is a moment when it seems to cross a threshold, as if it no longer belonged to the realm of clipboards and Coast Guard regulations but to the mystery of "the other side," where three-quarters of a million people are buried in wholesale graves. It's as if the ferry had sailed out of the world, into myth.

Oddly, the heirs of Charon resemble the man Thomas Bulfinch described as "old and squalid, but strong and vigorous." They are in their fifties and sixties mostly, and a lively bunch for all the proximity of death. Years ago a newspaperman spotted a liquor bottle on the table and concluded that the job of hauling the dead to Potter's Field was so depressing that ferrymen had to drink to keep their spirits. It's a fine joke now. Deckhands may stand beside you on a passage across the strait, sharing the panorama of masts and clapboard houses on City Island, the towers of the Throgs Neck Bridge, the snug geography where Long Island Sound funnels into the East River.

"Depressing, isn't it?" they'll say.

The hub of this unexpected cheer is the green plywood crew shack perched on the precarious dock. Whenever a boat's wake slops against the pilings the coffee mugs inside sway on their hooks, and the ferrymen say you shouldn't sit around without a life jacket. Faces in the shack are bathed in the gloomy light of fluorescent bulbs and the ghastly glow of "Good Morning America" from the TV atop the refrigerators. But the lockers are plastered with calendar girls and takeout menus, and Brownie, the ferry dog, is underfoot, and conversation never flags, thanks to a couple of garrulous Italians, Arnold (Cookie) Paoli and Abele Nicolich -- big bandannaed men with conservative views and liberal appetites. They're joined by Arthur Harris, the taciturn deckhand from St. Kitts who in 1955 won the first of three titles as "America's Most Muscular Man." And Capt. Brendan Herity, who came to the United States in 1953 aboard a British molasses tanker and still retains the lilt of his native Sligo. And Nemer Mufadi, the engineer from Jordan. Mufadi is the newcomer. When he arrived he was not accustomed to the morbid undertow of the job, but he was a quick study.

"You come in in the morning, and before you have your coffee you see the stiffs and the inmates. It's not scary -- it's something else. It's a feeling that makes you think about life. But then you get used to it. You go to a funeral once or twice, it's not the same when you see it every morning."

Thus mornings are given not to the last ends of the indigent and unclaimed dead but to food and politics and an ongoing seminar in international relations.

"Did you meet our Arab terrorist?" said Paoli.

"Eight years I been in this country," Mufadi replied. "I fit right in the first week with my good friend Arnold."

"Don't you ever leave this country. They'll shoot you over there, if I don't shoot you myself."

"Everybody's conservative here," Nicolich explained.

"The only liberals are the stiffs," said the captain.

"As long as they're in the box and ain't running around on the dock," said Daniel Maguire, who sometimes works the night watch (a man stays at the dock 24 hours a day to keep an eye on the ferry).

"I sincerely hope the first goddam bomb falls smack on New York. Blow the whole thing up, that's the only thing that will cleanse this country," Cookie Paoli said enthusiastically, then turned reflective. "When death is all around you, you -- "

"You eat macaroni," interrupted Nicolich, who was fixing it for lunch. "Tomorrow we're gonna have Chinese food."

"Okay, let's go," said the captain. "We've got a boatload of liberal stiff's to bury."

Mufadi spoke up suddenly, a sly point to make. "You know, Cookie," he said, "spaghetti's from the Middle East."

At the turn of the century there were 38 ferry lines working the islands of New York. Most were put out of business when Manhattan was webbed up with bridges and tunnels. The city operates just two lines today: the Staten Island route, with its fleet of vessels that run around the clock and can carry 6,000 passengers, and the Hart Island route, with one boat -- marine vessel Michael Cosgrove, named after a commissioner of the now defunct Department of Docks -- which runs four days a week.

Hart Island duty is a plum for ferrymen with seniority. The pace is relaxed, the operation comfortably removed from the headquarters of the city Bureau of Ferries and Marine Aviation (or Marine Aggravation, as it's known to longtime employes). The ferrymen aren't sorry to be missing the pleasures of public service in New York, either. On the Staten Island route crews sometimes get jabbed with umbrellas and slapped with slices of pizza; they have to row after would-be suicides who jump overboard with hands tied or briefcases loaded with bricks. Last July a Staten Island passenger went on a rampage with a sword and left two people dead and nine wounded.

Despite the relatively tractable nature of dead passengers, the Hart Island job has its drawbacks. It's not for the overly impressionable. Coffins occasionally crack open, or leak, and some days the stench of unembalmed bodies is strong enough to make you lean over the side and heave. In winter, northeast winds rake miserably through the shack. Occasionally office pranks get a little macabre. There was a mate named Henry Hessen who served at Hart Island. He was known for his conical cap -- conical because he kept a lifetime's worth of paperwork stored in the crown. Staten Island captain and ferry museum curator Ted Kosta remembered a time when Hessen took home what he thought was a bag of fish. "They'd switched the fish for the head of a corpse," Kosta recalled. "It didn't bother him when he found it, but he said if his family had seen it they would have dropped dead."

There have been potter's fields in New York for more than two centuries, on such notable real estate as Washington Square and the block now occupied by the New York Public Library. As the city grew, bodies were disinterred and reburied farther from the center, until 1869, when the city purchased a 101-acre island on the outer limits of the metropolitan area. There in the sandy ground of Hart Island the bones of a 24-year-old orphan named Louisa Van Slyke, who died alone, were laid to rest. She was the first.

Today, one of every 29 people who die in the city goes to Potter's Field, about 50 a week. To some degree the

bodies buried there are a measure of what sociologists call a "disaffiliated life." But the evidence is also strong that they are an index of poverty. Names were known for 95 percent of the people buried in 1984, and advocates for the homeless and the poor in New York argue that many of those had kin who would not have let them go to a pauper's grave if they could have afforded a private burial.

When the refrigerators of the county morgues are full, the bodies are shipped out. A white card listing the name, the age, and place and date of death is stapled to the coffin. The coffins, manufactured under contract by the Abott and Abott Box Co. in Queens, cost \$ 37 each.

Many bodies -- 80 percent from the Manhattan County morgue at Bellevue -- are released to medical schools for use in pathology classes. The bodies are eventually returned to the city, and then dispatched to Hart Island, where they are known to some ferrymen as "college boys."

It was a load of unclaimed dead from the Brooklyn County morgue that arrived on a humid Wednesday morning last month. A blue and gray truck backed down the dock and stopped beside the barred bus that transports the burial detail from the Correctional Institute for Men on Rikers Island. Prison labor has been used at Potter's Field since the 19th century. In recent years the burials were performed by inmates incarcerated on Hart Island, many of them turnstile jumpers, three-card monte players, graffitists -- so-called, in one of the island's many ironies, "quality of life offenders." Now the detail is assembled from volunteers and goes to prisoners who do not have warrants against them, convictions for "notorious" crimes or inclinations, in the estimation of jail officials, to make a break for daylight. The inmates -- about 30 -- are paid 50 cents an hour.

"It's considered good duty," says Tom Antene, a Corrections Department spokesman. "There's a minimum-security atmosphere, fresh air and travel."

The prisoners were dressed in green fatigues, and a few covered their faces with surgical masks. Two scrambled into the truck. One, with a carbon crayon, scribbled the name Samuel Knox on the outside of a coffin. Samuel Knox, 73, last at the King's County Morgue, was passed to waiting hands on dock. One after another, the coffins were unloaded: John Weston, 79, and Robert Imhoff, 59, and Robert Johnson, 77.

"Robert Johnson!" cried one of the guards, a thin man with blond hair and a pale face. "That's my name, that's me!" He followed the coffin to the ferry as if it contained his fate. The fresh pine lumber glowed against the weathered wood of the dock.

"You gotta be careful with that box," he said to the two prisoners lugging it. "That's me." The coffin was boosted onto the back of a green truck parked on the deck of the ferry. "God, I hope it's better than this," Johnson said.

The lid on one of the coffins popped up a little, and the prisoners jumped back.

When all nine boxes were in the truck, one of the guards said, "Okay, line up for count." The prisoners stood double file on the deck like school kids on a field trip.

Cookie Paoli and Arthur Harris untied the docking ropes and heaved them onto a piling. Capt. Herity leaned out the window on the bridge, and when one of the officers called "All set, Captain," he eased the throttle down and the ferry nosed out of the dock, flushing a few gulls with its whistle.

"Pin down," said Harris. Now the rudder at the bow was locked and the rudder at the stern of the double-ended ferry was free to steer. The channel was 30 feet deep at the center, with a current running at 1 1/2 knots. The sun was high, the visibility fine, but the captain peered intently at the radar.

"If you've got it, you might as well make sure it's working," he said.

As navigating challenges go, the passage ranks well below steering the Staten Island ferry across New York harbor, or piloting a tug up the tricky currents of the East River. "You wouldn't want to get into trouble on a run like this," the captain said, shuddering to think of it. "It would look awful -- such a short run, such a small boat."

A few sloops sported with a soft breeze. Most of the prisoners perched on the coffins. Some reclined on deck, listening to headphones. One man, who said he was doing a year for forgery, shrugged and declared that his life, at the moment, was a drag. "This is as close as I'm gonna get to the beach this year," he said.

And so the ferry closed in on the other side.

The shore was littered with sea wrack and beds of mussels. You could distinguish the bricks in the smokestack from the days when the city ran a full-scale penitentiary on the island; some of the abandoned buildings date from the Civil War. Stumps from an old pier protruded from the water. The fence circling the old baseball diamond where the bleachers were brought from Ebbets Field was bundled in vines. A flaking yellow sign warned "Prison, Keep Off."

Paoli and Harris jumped down and hooked a couple of rotten-looking dock ropes to the cleats on the ferry deck. The captain reversed the engines. The dock's wooden superstructure groaned as the ropes jerked taut and the ramp came up, the deckhands furiously winching in the slack on two rusty windlasses.

When the ramp was finally level with the deck, officer Hugh Conroy drove the truck onto the island, inmates and coffins jouncing in the back. The deckhands ambled ashore to take Brownie for a walk.

Hart Island is off-limits to the public, but permission to visit can be obtained by writing to the Department of Corrections. Eugene Ruppert, the wry department captain who heads the burial detail and seems, like the ferrymen, immune to the whole morbid business, gives a tour of the island about once a month for officials, professors, students and journalists (including one, recently, from Pravda). Only twice in his four-year tenure has anyone who actually knew someone buried there negotiated the bureaucracy and stepped ashore.

It is a strange and unsettling place, full of vignettes of life set incongruously amid traces of death. Wild house cats scampered under deserted buildings. A rosebush grew out of a dinghy. A large flock of Canada geese stretched across the fields of the dead, waddling and honking among the white concrete posts that mark the mass graves.

There are three monuments dedicated to the dead. At the entrance of the central field, a small headstone is nestled among flowers and yews. It was erected by the family of Al Piccone, the backhoe operator who dug the trenches on the island for many years. On a hill, a white tower 30 feet high inscribed "Peace" was built in the 1940s by prisoners. And standing in marigolds and begonias, a granite cross erected in 1902. It says, "He Calleth His Own by Name."

"I've seen the weeds higher than the cross," Ruppert said, wheeling boldly around a curve in a heap of a truck whose right front door had a habit of flying open. In the early 1980s vandals made the most use of the place, joy riding in the department trucks. ("Any 9-year-old kid can hot-wire a truck in New York," Ruppert said.) Fire was set to the old warden's house, destroying 14 years of burial logbooks from the 1960s and 1970s.

Over the years the island has served as a quarantine area for victims of yellow fever, a shelter for homeless men and a U.S. Army Nike missile base. In the 1920s developer Solomon Riley envisioned a "Negro Coney Island." In 1972 a New York City study suggested the island could be turned into a "sort of Monte Carlo or Riviera for Long Island Sound."

The death rate in New York is about the same today as it was half a century ago. The number of unclaimed dead is less than a third, however. There are fewer strangers, in a sense. But most important, the rate of infant mortality is much lower than it was in the 1930s, and of all the bodies received at Potter's Field, a large percentage have always been babies. Even today, almost a third of the burials are infants. Their miniature coffins are lowered into trenches separate from adults, and recorded in separate logbooks. Some of the records are still lying around in the trailer office where Ruppert and his officers keep a pot of coffee. The ink in the musty ledgers is pale, but the tally of Baby Trench No. 31, opened in 1927, is clear:

"3100, Joyce Mary, 1 mo., 2/28/27, prematurity.

"3102, Hoffman Baby, 1 day, 2/28/27, prematurity.

"3104, Smith Willie, few min., 3/1/27, cough, edema.

"3105, Unknown Female Infant, 10 min., 3/1/27, prematurity."

And so on, page after page.

The area marked off for burials now lies along a road of sand and mussel shells in the shade of willow oaks. Ruppert parked his truck as the prisoners and coffins were arriving. A blue backhoe crouched beside a trench like a giant praying mantis.

The prisoners set the coffins on the ground, and two of them began to cut the burial numbers into the pine lids with a gas-powered router. The backhoe plucked away a temporary steel wall in the trench, and several prisoners hopped in and began to rake away the damp soil. The odor was strong. Samuel Knox, 73, and John Weston, 79, and the deceased Robert Johnson, 77, were passed down into the hole, along with six others. One box was laid on top of another, like those on a shoe store shelf. They were set three deep, beside the still-fresh wood of the coffins buried the day before, as the coffins the next day would be buried beside them, 150 to a trench.

The prisoners clambered about tamping dirt into the cracks with shovels and rakes, filling in so the boxes wouldn't shift.

"I saw my name once," somebody said.

Waves beat on the eastern beach, the wind stirred in the trees, the drone of cicadas vied with the drone of an electrical generator. It seemed something ought to have been said, or done, to relieve the powerful need for ceremony -- but what, and why, and for whom? And it was over soon enough. The backhoe swung the steel wall back into place, and a couple of boards were placed across the top. A little dirt was raked and shoveled over.

The prisoners went to scrub themselves clean and wash the truck out with a solution of hydrochlorine, and then to lunch. The trench, when full, would be covered with topsoil, marked with a numbered white concrete post and seeded with grass. Soon the geese would be swanking about, and there wouldn't be much to tell from the earth beneath.

On the trip back one of the ferrymen relayed a story that had greatly impressed him. He'd seen a coffin that had been disinterred on the other side after many years. It was set on the surface. It seemed to be perfectly intact. And then, in a matter of minutes, it crumbled into dust. CAPTION: Photo, The ferry Micheal Costgrove, which

brings pine coffins containing unclaimed and indigent dead to Hart Island. PHOTOS BY MARGARET THOMAS -  
- TWP; Photo, Arnold Paoli with Brownie, the crew dog.; Photo, Deck Abele Nicolich.; Photo, Brendan Herity,  
captain of the Cosgrove.; Photo, Arthur Harris, the deckhand from St. Kitts.; Photo, A prisoner labels the coffin of  
one of New York's unclaimed dead. The white pine boxes, manufactured in Queens, cost the city \$37 each.; Photo,  
Prisoners unload a shipment of coffins from a Brooklyn morgue. Prison labor has been used at Potter's Field  
since the 19th century.; Photo, The logbooks from the 1920s are still legible. the tally of Baby Trench No. 31,  
opened in 1927. A third of the bodies buried at Hart Island are infants.; Photo, At the entrance of the central field,  
a marker erected by the family of a Hart Island backhoe operator.; Photo, Prisoners lower a coffin into the trench.  
An average of 50 are buried each week on the island.; Photo, A prisoner uncovers a trench to begin a new day of  
burials. Coffins are stacked three deep, 150 to a trench.; Photo, Dirt is raked over coffins to prevent them from  
shifting until the next day.; Photo, no caption, Photographs by Margaret Thomas -- TWP

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