

# BARREN ISLAND

By Carol Zoref

Ask about the smell. That is what everyone asks no matter who or why or where they might be. It is the detail they want most when they hear about the horses and dogs and pigs that filled the barges; about the wake of stench when the meat markets closed for the day and the surgeries closed for the morning and the rest of New York paused in coffee shops and automats, in lunchrooms and kitchens and union halls, on curbsides and at cleared-away corners of the cutting tables in the garment factories on 39th Street to eat sandwiches made from animal parts, the ones that would not be burned that day on Barren Shoal.

Cow bone, pig bone, sheep bone, horse bone. Chicken bone, turkey bone, dog bone, cat bone. Maggot-covered cow skins, postulated hog snouts, ulcerated sheep hides, abscessed horse heads, festering dog tails, cat jaws. Wet smells settled in the creases of human skin, rose like cruel heat across the harbor, lingered on the silent curls of factory smoke. They were smells one could touch, a gummy scrim over every breathing hour. Fleas, flies, snakes, worms, beetles, lice, mites, ticks, mold, mildew, and fungus gorged on the smells that not even the furnaces on Barren Shoal burned away.

My family lived on Barren Shoal for twenty-five years, my father glad to have work to keep us clothed in something better than the rags that the pickers scavenged and stitched and salvaged and wore and sold and traded and wore down into rags again. Bones became glue, thread became cloth, and in the end everyone was different and everyone was unchanged.

About things such as these, an 80-year-old woman like me, Marta Eisenstein Lane, of sound mind and in full possession of her senses, should know.

My parents came to Barren Shoal in 1914 after who knows how many days at Ellis Island and six weeks of exhausted, listless sleep on the benevolent floor of Aunt Sara and Uncle David's one bedroom apartment in Borough Park. My cousin, Flat Sammy, born eight months earlier, wailed every hour of every one of those weeks, a protest against the mean circumstances of his life. Sara, my father's sister and only living relative, had been kicked in the stomach by a coal-cart horse gone crazy three weeks before her delivery date. She was carried upstairs just in time for Sammy to arrive through a confusion of spasms, his soft, fetal head irreparably misshapen. The horse, still hitched to the coal cart and having spasms of its own, dropped dead on the cobblestone, saliva rolling from its jaw like the blistering scum on a pot of boiling soup.

The coal horse, like every dead horse in New York City, was carried that night by barge to either Barren Island or Barren Shoal, where it was butchered and boiled down for glue and grease. Flat Sammy – that is what we called him on account of the horseshoe-shaped dent on the back of his head and so as not to confuse him with Uncle David's brother who lived in Philadelphia, also named Sam – Flat Sammy did not die. Flat Sammy survived for no reason except that most of us die in pieces, not all at once. Even the horse that kicked Aunt Sara.

I have examined the history books and public documents, have read how the first garbage barge arrived at Barren Island, the bigger and nearest neighbor to Barren Shoal, in 1852. I have learned how before the word was anglicized, the Dutch called it Beeren Island for the bears they believed lived there feeding off fish and clams and crabs, though there is no record, official or anecdotal, of any Dutch settler ever sighting a bear among the pine stands and sage and white sand beaches of the islands in Jamaica Bay.

For who-knows-how-long prior to the Dutch and their imaginary bears, the Native Americans called this place by their own word, Equindito, meaning Broken Lands. It was a name that was custom fit to the small islands it contained. One of the smallest, sandiest pieces was our own small island, the flat and forsaken Barren Shoal, separated from the better known Barren Island by the merest of shallows at low tide and a few feet of water when the tide was high. Most of the natives who lived on Equindito were massacred by Dutch settlers, who chased away the survivors who did not die. This does not change the fact that Equindito was their home for a time that mattered, meaning any amount of time at all.

The last public garbage incinerator on Barren Island, according to the city records, was closed in 1918; the last glue factory, in 1933. But that was Barren Island, not Barren Shoal, about which there are no records. Not even my grandson Eric, the anthropologist, has had any luck with finding out more than I, and he knows how to find things better than anyone.

Today, on this very day, if someone searches for Barren Shoal on a map, they will come up empty handed. If their interest outweighs this disappointment, they might search an atlas dating back a century or so. If they are anything like Eric, our homegrown scholar, they might sift through the New York Municipal Archives, laying their hands on once-important documents that no one has touched in years. If they are thorough – or lucky – they will come upon the name “Barren Island” in the disintegrating tax records, land grants, and minutes of the meetings of the old Common Council or the City Committee on Planning and Survey. But they will not find a single word about Barren Shoal. They can nose around the Port Authority of New York & New Jersey and will have no more luck finding Barren Shoal than they would finding the places where the government buries its unwanted uranium, hoping that we will forget.

Believe what you will. Everyone does. The fact that every trace of Barren Shoal is gone does not mean it was never there.