

A Relic of the Past Looks to the Future

Devin J. Poore

to the sound of any and everything by John Mellencamp...

While still in the shadow of the town's realtor offices, bloated condos, and parking garages, the shoreline of Hoboken, New Jersey has undergone revitalization during the past decade. Once nothing but shipyards and factories, the old piers have been turned to parks and the waterfront road lined with wide brick walkways dotted with trees. It all welcomes joggers, dog walkers, and anyone looking for a few moments of time to themselves.

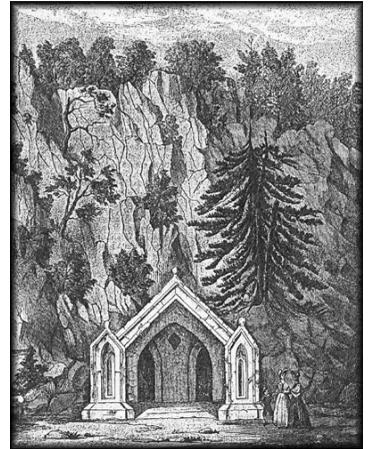
Many who live in Hoboken would probably say that it's about time the town turned its attention to such matters. Time to take back from the coffee houses and cell phone stores. Time to give something back to nature. Many of those people would probably be surprised to find out that tree lined paths and retreats for the city weary urban dweller were once the purpose for this stretch of the Hudson River.

During the 1800's, Hoboken was a day retreat for the inhabitants of Manhattan and other large nearby cities, the rural setting providing a quiet ebb to the city's hectic flow of life. Not yet overrun with dockyards and factories, the town held many attractions, such as taverns, inns, and recreation fields, all welcome distractions for Manhattan residents, only a short ferry ride away. Among the Hoboken destinations, one of the most popular was called Sybil's Cave.

Sybil's Cave really wasn't - in the technical sense - a cave. Manually dug in the 1830's to better reach a natural spring within the rocky cliff that overlooks the Hudson River, it quickly became a well know local feature. As the River Walk - the road on the Hudson shore that was home to many of the attractions - gained popularity, so did Sybil's Cave. The proprietors of the cave made a business of selling water from the natural spring within, charging a penny a glass, an exorbitant price for the time. The water was much touted for its medicinal qualities, and they did a brisk business even at that high price.

The biggest event associated with the cave during its years of popularity was the death of Mary Rogers. When her body washed up on the shore near the cave in 1841, the ensuing investigation and extensive coverage by the tabloids of the day created a national sensation. The coverage even attracted the attention of a then unemployed writer in Philadelphia named Edgar Allen Poe (who for a time would even live in Hoboken). He was inspired by the news reports to start a story that would later become "The Mystery of Marie Roget". He set the piece in Paris, but the facts of the Hoboken murder made up the bulk of the story.

The incident started the town's association with violent acts a century before the title scene of "The Sopranos" was filmed. But murder and intrigue did not hurt Sybil's Cave's business, instead it drove up tourism from people who wanted to witness the scene of the famous crime. Killing off the Cave's business would come at the hand of the Board of Health when, in the late 1880's, they



sampled the all natural and medicinal water that was selling so briskly. The liquid was quickly condemned as unfit for human consumption and the site was shut down. A tavern was then built on the spot, and over the years various buildings were erected and torn down on the site. The cave remained as is, hidden behind structures, sometimes used for storage, other times forgotten. In the 1930's, the town rediscovered the lost attraction, and filled it in to deter anyone from seeking it out and injuring themselves inside. As the cave faded from memory, the bulk of the 20th century saw a transformed Hoboken. Tourist attractions and riverside parks gave way to an industrial town as it swelled with dockyards, ship yards, factories, and warehouses.



The past decade has seen Hoboken and its waterfront undergo a rebirth. Now, instead of merely a day-trip destination, it has become akin to a sixth borough to New York City. Over forty thousand people reside in the Mile Square City, living in the now re-purposed factories, and crowding the sidewalks with baby strollers and pug dogs on designer leashes.

With the change in the town and efforts to bring nature back to the waterfront, it seems appropriate that the ghost of the cave would make itself known once more as well. Late in 2004, survey teams searched for and found the old entrance, on Steven's University property, next to what was River Walk, and is now Frank Sinatra Drive. Hoboken's Mayor, David Roberts, has announced his intention to re-open the attraction within the next few years.



What will become of the new incarnation of Sybil's Cave remains to be seen. Maybe it will become a cell phone store eventually. Maybe it will - like most other public spaces in the town - be renamed after Frank Sinatra in some way. It is the vogue thing to do, after all, even though the man always spoke ill of his place of birth.

Or maybe the cave will simply inspire writers once more, but under less morbid circumstances. The cave has already stirred another form of spreading the written word. On a late night in 2004, two writers were walking home when one posed the question: "I wonder if any of Sybil's Cave still exists?"

The response, while hopefully not prophetic, did give rise to the name of a new 'zine. "If so, it's probably been made into a parking garage, like everything else around here." 

Sybil's Garage thanks you!
See you inside issue three...