

The Tunnel Rats of Atlantic Avenue

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photo: Joshua Lott for The New York Times

THERE are so many things you can't do in the big, bad city, and you'd think that one of them would be climbing down a manhole when you're not an employee of the Department of Transportation or the Metropolitan Transportation Authority or Con Edison. But you would be wrong. The tunnel is reached by a manhole that is uncovered to serve as a portal to the past.

Thanks to Bob Diamond, the man who rediscovered a 19th-century Atlantic Avenue train tunnel in Downtown Brooklyn, you can scurry down a certain manhole without being hauled away by your ankles by the authorities.

Since his big reveal in 1980, Mr. Diamond, the 49-year-old founder of the Brooklyn Historic Railway Association, has been conducting tunnel tours via the manhole with the blessing of the D.O.T. But of late, Mr. Diamond has been pushing for another potential urban architectural "get."

Behind a wall in the tunnel, near Atlantic Avenue and Hicks Street, he believes, there is a steam locomotive lying on its side like an abandoned toy train, in "pristine condition, a virtual time capsule." And he wants to dig it up.

Mr. Diamond's passion for the project has drawn the interest of a movie director named Trey Nelson, who is working with an entity called Hungry Man Entertainment to film a documentary about Mr. Diamond's quest. If all goes well, the project could take the story of the man and the tunnel into the stratosphere.

The tunnel draws people from all over the city and tourists from abroad. I got tunnel fever when I was walking to a market in Brooklyn Heights and came upon the surreal sight of ordinary folks crawling into a manhole, some of them wearing their nice clothes. They were lined up in the middle of the intersection at Atlantic Avenue and Court Street, where crossing can seem like a game of chicken.

“What’s going on?” I asked a man about to climb down.

“Oh, some guy dug a hole to China,” he replied with a smirk.

The truth, said a woman waiting her turn, was that this was the entrance to an abandoned tunnel built in the 1800s. To see it, all I had to do was fork over \$15 to a man who described himself as “one of Bob’s elves.” I pondered briefly: Should I buy groceries or explore the bowels of Brooklyn? The choice was clear: Who needs to eat?

Greg Castillo, the 48-year-old vice president of the historic association, stood guard.

“Ever had any accidents?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” Mr. Castillo said.

Thus emboldened, I scrambled down a ladder as cars and trucks whizzed by my head, walked through a dirt trench and a doorway cut into a brick wall, and took a step back in time, into the arched tunnel. Built in 1844 by the Long Island Rail Road under the direction of the wealthy Cornelius Vanderbilt, the tunnel was sealed off in 1861, when the railroad grew less profitable.

The space seemed to be a balmy 65 degrees, and as more people congregated there, the air became thick with expectation. Two boys, like any good explorers afraid of the dark, came prepared with head lights and flashlights.

“This is so cool,” said Loretta Chan, a 33-year-old first-timer accessorized with miner’s lights. “But I think it’d be scarier if it had fewer people.”

Suddenly, the voice of a woman floated above the buzz. “Spirits! Spirits! Arise!” the voice said as two women dressed in 19th-century garb appeared.

Here was a key element of the tour: An acting troupe called LiveFeed punctuated the experience by performing what Aimee Davis, one of the group’s producers, calls “re-imagin-actments.” That’s historical fact mixed with a liberal dose of creative license.

The explorers began noticing a nattily dressed man carrying a suitcase. Asked to identify himself, the man whispered: “American agent. I’m trying to be covert.” His meeting with a “German spy” went down before our very eyes.

Then Mr. Diamond gave the word, and the tour began.

A rotund man who lives in Kensington and seems to wear a permanent half-smile, Mr. Diamond regaled the crowd with tales from the tunnel. German spies! Murder underground! Trains without brakes! Lady Pirates! Bootleg booze! At one point he got big laughs with the line: “This was all written up in the newspaper, so it had to be real.”

Mr. Diamond’s own story is the stuff of Brooklyn lore. Back when he was a disillusioned young engineering student at Pratt Institute, he was looking for something to believe in.

He found it in “The Cosgrove Report,” a 1979 book about President Lincoln’s assassination, which claimed that Brooklyn was home to a lost railroad in which pages from John Wilkes Booth’s diary might be hidden. With this tantalizing tidbit, an obsession was born.

MR. DIAMOND pored over old city maps and did copious research, as if looking for buried treasure, though not quite on the scale of the recently discovered man-of-war that sank in 1744 in the English Channel with four tons of gold coins. Then he told city officials about the forgotten tunnel beneath their feet. They resisted, and some of them told him there was no such thing, he said. Mr. Diamond, however, was most stubborn. Fast-forward to the proverbial egg on the official visage when he proved them wrong.

“Bob is the curator of history, an ordinary guy doing an extraordinary thing,” said Mr. Nelson, who compared him to Indiana Jones. “That passion, so absent these days in society, is what drew me in. So many people today are apathetic. They’re not adventurous.”

Below ground, about two-thirds of the way into the tunnel, Mr. Diamond nudged us forward as the weak light bulbs disappeared. Someone aimed a flashlight, and all that might physically stand between Mr. Diamond and his dream engine was revealed. The brick wall looked jagged and scarred; people walked up to touch it.

The big question now is whether Mr. Diamond will ever get that engine. Unlike Indy, he needs excavation permits. Last month, the D.O.T. turned down that request. In an e-mail message, Seth Solomonow, an agency spokesman, cited several reasons, among them: “There is no indication that the project — with no development or repair purpose — would merit the impact of disruptive, long-term lane closures.”

But don’t count Mr. Diamond out just yet. “I hope to persuade them to change their minds based upon the merits,” he said.

Mr. Nelson is also determined. “We are not giving up,” he said. “Bob is one of the really special characters in New York City. He is the tunnel.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/nyregion/thecity/15tunn.html? r=1>

