



A Tugboat Odyssey

WORDS & PHOTOS BY
Claudine Williams



Henry marine tugboats, Henry Girls, Dorothy J, Pelham, Staten Island

I've been fascinated by tugboats since moving to New York City nearly 15 years ago, admiring these small vessels as they do their mighty work along the East and Hudson Rivers.

Whether at my previous home on the Upper East Side or my current residence in Battery Park City, the tugboat has always fascinated me, always caught my eye and - yes - tugged at my heartstrings. They look powerful yet graceful and even beautiful, moving mesmerizingly slow along the water.

Look around any room in which you find yourself and, truly, most objects you see were moved, in some fashion, by a tugboat. Yes, everything from marble, glass and wood, to the clothes you are wearing and the food you eat. Much of it has been brought to you, slowly, by a tugboat captain and his crew.

I've long believed these hard-working individuals don't get the recognition they deserve so I set upon doing something about it, beginning with this photo essay. I only hope that you enjoy these images as much as I enjoyed capturing them.



< Captain Mike Vinik, in the wheelhouse of the Liz Vinik on the Arthur Kill.

Mike Vinik
Captain and Owner, Vinik Marine

WHAT WORDS WOULD YOU USE TO DESCRIBE A TUGBOAT?

Nimble and strong.

WHAT'S THE ODDEST THING YOU'VE EVER HAD TO MOVE?

One odd thing I helped move was a 20-foot floatable golf course for a Michelob Ultra beer commercial. That was pretty out of the ordinary. Brooks Koepka, the 2018 PGA Championship winner, had to hit the barge green from Governors Island and if he did, a rebate would be available to New Yorkers. He made the shot, and if you find the video online, you can see me honking the tugboat horn.



Insert tugboat noises here

Dean Dion

Captain, Henry Marine

HOW MUCH EXPERIENCE DOES A CAPTAIN NEED?

Hmm, 20 years. It's not even about the time though. I've always said to myself, some people have it and some people don't. It's like some people can ride a bike and some people can't. It comes naturally like that. I came from fishing. I would say the people that come from the fishing industry are the best I've ever seen because they've always worked on the water, they were used to towing things like fishing nets and figuring out how to put things on a boat, handling ropes and all that stuff.

WHAT'S A TYPICAL SCHEDULE LIKE?

Typical schedule is come in with my crew on a certain day. We buy food for the boat for two weeks. A typical day is waiting for calls for jobs to come in from Dorothy, the owner and CEO, or Rachel, her daughter and CEO. We might have to pick up a barge for a contractor in the area and deliver it to a dock where they are waiting. A job could be one day, or it could be multiple days. It's almost like an ambulance. You just sit here until the phone rings, on call twenty-four seven.



Captain Dean Dion at the back of the wheelhouse on the Pelham for Henry Marine.

Massiel Leon, deckhand



The Pelham, docked in Staten Island.

Captain Gordon Kelley at the wheelhouse controls for Carver Marine Towing in the New York Harbor, with (left to right) Andrew Nunamann, Robert Fioretti, Craig Baker.



Gordon Kelley

Captain, Carver Marine Towing
(a subsidiary of Carver Companies)

WHAT TYPES OF PEOPLE TEND TO MAKE THE BEST TUGBOAT CAPTAINS?

Haha. Well, there's a variety of captains. You have your old salty guys that are good to learn from. They are a little tougher on people. Then you have people like me who are younger, up and coming. People that have a good attitude when things get hard, instead of just throwing your hands up in the air and giving up. You can't do that. You have to finish your job. There's no, "We're gonna take a break". You've got to be able to push through, do your job, and not complain about it.

WHAT KINDS OF WILDLIFE HAVE YOU SEEN IN THE NEW YORK HARBOR?

All sorts of animals. Dolphins, turtles, seals. A whale under the Verrazzano bridge. I've even seen a snowy owl on a salt barge in the middle of the harbor.

View of the New York Harbor from the wheelhouse.



From inside the lower deck of Henry Marine's Pelham,
a view of the dock and the Manhattan skyline.

