

The Mayors of Long Island City

by J. Robert Lennon

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Abram D. Ditmars, the first mayor of Long Island City, was a respected attorney and son of prominent doctor-farmer Dow Ditmars. Already well known outside the legal profession for his selfless heroism when he accidentally and fortuitously interrupted an illegal 1868 crucifixion in Blissville (an event that had earned him the nickname “Old Hammersnatcher”), Ditmars coasted into the mayoralty in 1870. Among his achievements in office was to incorporate Long Island City as a separate municipality, under orders from his mustache, which spoke to him at night in a coarse whisper that also had the unwelcome effect of disrupting his marital activities and alienating his children. His first term was devoted to frugality and honesty, values not shared or approved by his mustache, which tried and failed to strangle him in his sleep. In 1872, Ditmars’s mustache threw its support behind his rival, Henry S. DeBevoise, enabling DeBevoise to seize the mayoralty.

DeBevoise was widely known to be in cahoots with the Hunter’s Point-based criminal enterprise known as “The Ring.” During his first term as mayor (1872-1875), he met regularly, in an underground bunker beneath the timber yard at the southern end of what is now Fifth Street, with a cabal of crime kingpins and their powerful mustaches to arrange for the plundering of the city’s coffers. (This practice is believed to be the origin of his then-nickname, “Count Underwood.”) During these meetings, the men would arrange themselves in a circle and their mustaches would extend and intertwine, forming a thick ring of sentient hair that, by vibrating at particular frequencies, issued pulses of malevolence-inducing energy out over western Long Island and, in clear weather, across the East River and into Murray Hill. The irresistible oscillations caused lawlessness to spike in affected areas, and led, lexicographers believe, to the coining of the term “crime wave.”

Meanwhile former mayor Ditmars had shaved. This brief period of mustache-independence led to his re-election as Long Island City’s third mayor, and he set into motion his plan to rid the city of corruption (thus his new nickname, “Brave Baldlip”). Soon, however, it dawned on him that his mustache, which he’d expected would require constant vigilance to suppress, wasn’t growing back at all. By the time he realized that it was, in fact, growing back *on the inside*, it was too late. In February of 1876, while giving a speech on the steps of the Long Island City Courthouse, the mustache burst through his flesh, fully enveloped him, and led

pursuers on a wild chase down 45th Avenue before it disappeared beneath the waters of the East River.

Ditmars was succeeded by John Quinn, aka “Woodenchops Johnson.” The fourth mayor of Long Island City, Quinn was a reserved, uncommunicative man who was revealed, by late June of 1876, to have in fact been a highly realistic painting rendered on an oak plank. Nevertheless, his mustache, which was quite real and had allied itself against the criminal forces of “The Ring,” managed to keep the wooden effigy in office until November, when it was handily defeated by DeBevoise and ritually burned in a ceremony that featured a performance of the Symphonic Poems of Franz Liszt by the New York Philharmonic, under the direction of Leopold Damrosch.

Thus began a seven-year period of terror at the hands of the mustache-dominated political machine. Mayor DeBevoise, now nicknamed “Mindless Flesh Host” by the mustache that controlled him, demanded that every man, woman, and child in Long Island City wear a long, luxuriant beard. Initially unpopular, the “Beard Act” of 1877 eventually led to a cultural renaissance in the region, as women of means competed to sport the most extravagant horsehair prosthetics, children fashioned false beards, called “rustlers,” out of old newspapers, and taverns overflowed with men exchanging tips for growing, styling, and pacifying their facial hair. Stage plays of the era dramatized the class conflicts among various beards and mustaches (affectionately nicknamed “Scratchums” or “Furry Playfellows”), and racy illustrations of clean-shaven men and women licking each other’s faces exchanged hands in backrooms and dark alleys. This era of social order, sustained and underscored by deep corruption, endured well into the era of fifth mayor George Petry (nicknamed “Vatty” due to his origins as a bacterial culture grown in a vat, and designated the biological conveyance for former mayor DeBevoise’s mustache, whose consumption of its host body had necessitated the change in administration), until the shocking events of 1885.

For some time, the Hell Gate, the narrow strait that separated Astoria from Randall’s and Wards islands, had been deemed unnavigably dangerous for the maritime vessels advancing New York’s increasing commerce with the world. The Army Corps of Engineers had been blasting rock from the river’s bottom for decades, but on October 10 of that year they set off the largest explosion yet, employing 300,000 pounds of dynamite to annihilate Flood Rock, a prominent formation to the east of Manhattan’s 93rd Street. Unbeknownst to officials, the rock had for nine years also been the underwater home of a rare freshwater giant squid, soon to be nicknamed “Mighty Tenlegs,” whose lip harbored the escaped mustache of subsumed

ex-mayor Abram Ditmars, now grown to enormous size and unfathomable power. The Flood Rock explosion incensed the squid and its follicular overlord, and the two rose from the river and began their campaign of brutal revenge upon the human population of Long Island City.

Battles among Mighty Tenlegs, “The Ring,” and the Mayor’s office would rage for more than a dozen years. In 1887, the mustachioed sea monster breached the ramparts of the mayoral compound and squeezed George Petry to death, creating a power vacuum that was quickly occupied by boastful Irish-American brawler Patrick Jerome Gleason, who, along with his formidable muttonchops, became known as “Gatling Paddy,” after the gilded machine gun he wielded against the terrible creature. Five years of strife with the squid and its mustache took their toll on Gleason, and he resigned in 1893, passing his post on to Horatio S. “The Human Peanut” Sanford and retiring upstate to a secluded cabin in the Peekskills, presumably for good. But when, in 1895, Sanford was attacked by, set upon, and absorbed into the deadly hybrid river beast, nearly doubling its fearsome power, Gleason (now called “Comeback Pat”) emerged from retirement, returned to Long Island City, and led a three-year paramilitary campaign against the bristly water brute. Allegiances were divided among the shadowy members of “The Ring,” and this disharmony, combined with the intensity of the crime syndicate’s battles with the leviathan, decimated its influence. Only with the help of New York City mayor Robert Van Wyck, and his foppish but pugnacious mustache “Thick Rick,” were the colossus and its fiendish whiskers defeated, and the effort left the municipality exhausted and traumatized. Indeed, the struggle led Gleason, lately known by the moniker “Sleepy Jerry” for the narcoleptic fits these nightmarish clashes had induced, to relinquish the city’s independence to New York and bring this dramatic era in Long Island City’s history to an end.

Today, Long Island City is on the move. Its population is growing, and the neighborhood has become known for its scenic waterfront parks, thriving arts community, and draconian anti-facial-hair laws. All men are required to shave twice daily, and bearded visitors must apply for temporary visas that necessitate invasive and humiliating medical examinations. Even once they have been permitted to cross the heavily guarded border, bearded visitors are subjected to incessant, pernicious, and often violent harassment and discrimination. Anyway, it’s really great to be here tonight.