

URBAN TACTICS

For You, Half Price

An homage to the biggest, most endearing, most fabled scam of them all.

By GABRIEL COHEN

THE year is 1899, and a saucy con artist named Peaches O'Day is trying to sell the Brooklyn Bridge. She succeeds, too, passing it off to a gullible fellow who pays her \$200 and receives a bill of sale reading, "One bridge in good condition." As punishment, she is run out of town, but she returns in triumph, disguised in a black wig as the French entertainer Mademoiselle Fifi, and goes on to be elected mayor of the city.

So it went in the 1937 comedy "Every Day's a Holiday," a Mae West film that made merry with one of the most cherished notions about New York and the gullibility to be found there: that someone would be foolish enough to buy one of the city's iconic landmarks.

Since the bridge was completed in 1883, the idea of illegally selling it has become the ultimate example of the power of persuasion. A good salesman could sell it, a great swindler would sell it, and the perfect sucker would fall for the scam.

But this was not just a rhetorical or a fictional conceit. A turn-of-the-century confidence man named George C. Parker actually sold the Brooklyn Bridge more than once. According to Carl Sifakis, who tells his story in "Hoaxes and Scams: A Compendium of Deceptions, Ruses and Swindles," Parker — who was also adept at selling the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Statue of Liberty and Grant's Tomb — produced impressive forged documents to prove that he was the bridge's owner, then convinced his buyers that they could make a fortune by controlling access to the roadway. "Several times," Mr. Sifakis wrote, "Parker's victims had to be rousted from the bridge by police when they tried to erect toll barriers."

Another seller was William McCloudy, also known as "I.O.U. O'Brien," who sold the bridge in 1901, "for which he was convicted of grand larceny and served two and a half years in Sing Sing," The New York Times wrote some years later.

In writing his book "Hustlers and Con Men: An Anecdotal History of the Confidence Man and His Games," Jay Robert Nash interviewed an elderly swindler named Joseph "Yellow Kid" Weil, who said he had known several criminal vendors of the bridge. Mr. Weil, whom Mr. Nash visited in a Chicago nursing home and described as "probably the greatest con man of the 20th century," recalled a swindler named Reed C. Waddell, who worked the bridge swindle in the 1880's and 1890's. Mr. Weil also

Gabriel Cohen is the author of "Red Hook," a novel.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times; illustration by The New York Times

claimed to know Waddell's successors in that trade, the notorious Charles and Fred Gondorf.

Perpetrators such as Mr. Waddell and the Gondorf brothers were savvy. They timed the path of bat cops working near the bridge, and when they knew the officers would be out of sight, they propped up signs reading "Bridge for Sale," showed the edifice to their targets, and separated them

from their money as quickly as possible. "The Gondorfs sold the bridge many times," Mr. Nash said. "They would sell it for two, three hundred dollars, up to one thousand. Once they sold half the bridge for two-fifty because the mark didn't have enough cash."

And there were plenty of marks. "The oddity of the thing today," said Luc Sante, author of the book "Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York," "is not that there

might have been con artists ready to sell the bridge, but that there would have been suckers both gullible enough and sufficiently well-heeled to fall for it."

By all accounts, the bulk of the suckers were greenhorns, fresh off the boat. Swindlers used to approach the stewards of international vessels docked at Ellis Island and pay them for information about passengers who might have money and be in-

terested in buying property. "They didn't understand the country," Mr. Nash said of this population. "They didn't understand the law. But they understood that this was supposed to be the land of opportunity."

The Brooklyn Bridge had several attributes that made it particularly well suited for this sort of endeavor. Its proximity to the port made it highly visible to newcomers who might be likely marks, and its size provided opportunities to show it off while avoiding the law. But perhaps most critical was its considerable fame. "In the 19th century," said Kathleen Hulser, the public historian at the New-York Historical Society, "the bridge was one of the two best-known symbols of America," the other being the Statue of Liberty.

Vendors of the bridge not only counted on the gullibility or greed of their targets; they also appealed to their vanity. Buyers could believe, as Mr. Sifakis put it, that "they had become real men of substance, great capitalists."

"All great monuments will have swindles built around them," he added. "The appeal is to own a piece of the rock."

Even as the nature of the immigrant population shifted, the scam endured. "Up to the 1920's people were still trying," Mr. Nash said. "But it was a hard sale. Immigrants had become much more sophisticated and knowledgeable, and by that time the processors at Ellis Island were handing out cards or booklets saying, 'You can't buy public buildings or streets.'" These shifts explain why the Brooklyn Bridge is the span associated with swindles; the city's other bridges were built after the high tide of gullibility had already begun slipping away.

Long after actual sales of the Brooklyn Bridge subsided, the concept still roused the public imagination and remained embedded in popular culture. In the 1947 movie "It Happened in Brooklyn," Frank Sinatra played a young private home from the war who sang plaintively to the woman he loves: "Don't let no one tell you/ I've been tryin' to sell you the Brooklyn Bridge." Even Bugs Bunny got in on the act; in the 1949 cartoon "Bowery Bugs," an old man is so charmed by the rabbit's tale of the famous bridge jumper Steve Brodie (Brodie's feat, alas, was a hoax) that he agrees to buy the bridge from him.

AND because of the Internet, which has provided seemingly endless new opportunities to propagate frauds, there's life in the old con yet. One particularly memorable attempt to sell the bridge is documented on Scamorama.com, a Web site that presents e-mail exchanges between would-be scammers and their not-so-gullible targets.

In one, a swindler using the name Genevieve e-mailed a target calling himself Vidocq (a pseudonym that should have warned off the scammer, it being the name of a famous French criminologist). In broken English, the scammer presented a convoluted story of riches tied up after a coup in Liberia and tried to entice Vidocq into sending money to help gain release of the funds. Vidocq did his best to gain the swindler's trust, then turned the tables by offering shares in the Brooklyn Bridge. The notion piqued the swindler's interest, and an involved exchange of e-mail messages followed before the scammer finally realized just who was being conned.

When it comes to victims and victimizers, perhaps the humorist Will Rogers deserves the last word. "They may call me a 'rube' and a 'hick,'" he said. "But I'd a lot rather be the man who bought the Brooklyn Bridge than the man who sold it."