

# making history on ellis island

by burt i. twilegar  
former editor of "Weekly Log"

It has been rumored at one time and other that the "great white fathers" of filmdom will someday weave the strange, fascinating story of Ellis Island into the theme of one of their top drawer cinema epics — and what a picture that could be. Certainly the fabulous alien characters, the activities of the immigration department and the magnificent accomplishments of the Coast Guard would serve as ideal background material for the romantic escapades of the Bergmans and the Gables, and there is an earlier, adventurous era in the history of the island, which might prove to be most interesting and exciting as a movie setting.

The earliest recollection of activities on the island dates back to the days when our country first blossomed out as a nation and the doings of pirates and thieves were associated with the initial records. In those days before the turn of the nineteenth century, this little plot of land strategically located in the middle of the New York Harbor, was known as Gibbet Island. A check with Mr. Webster's dictionary reveals that the word, "gibbet" stands for gallows.

It was an appropriate name, however, for the records mention, quite sheepishly, that the island then served as a favorite haven for pirates and crooks of the world and that many an erring one met his untimely end on our magic isle. Later, the State of New York, evidently pleased with the success of the pirate necktie parties, decided to use the land as a hanging grounds for erring criminals and it is a matter of state record that many a "Cut Throat Louie" paid his debt to society within the sacred (sea) walls of the island.

Shortly before the War of 1812 it was decided by the Federal Government to make a "fighting base" out of the land and they even went so far as to have real ammunition around to use in the guns. (Times did change, didn't they?) At that time it was decided to fortify the "Rock" to act as a shield to protect the seemingly more important Governor's Island, and a strong fort was established. It is said that two or three tiers of guns and a circular battery mounting 14 heavy guns were erected.

However, the island's claim as a fighting bastion was short lived and a few years later the State of New York ceded the property to the United States Government.

For many years thereafter it was used as a storage place for ammunition. Just how the island stood up as a fighting base during the battles with the British is not mentioned so it is assumed that no "last ditch stands" or outstanding victories were won on the island battlefield.

Many, many years before the time when a Mr. Ellis put in his two cents and claimed the island which still bears his name, such christenings as "Kioshk", "Gull", "Buckling", "Bedloe's" and "Oyster" were used at various times to describe the island. Undoubtedly, the reasons were apparent in each case, but the records are vague now, except in the naming of the latter.

It seems that at one time, probably around 1850, the little island became quite famous for its Oyster Feasts and New Yorkers would flock from miles away to partake of the delectable food. It is not clear whether the fish lovers had to catch their own or whether a few enterprising young concessioners were open for business, but in any event the fame of the island was heralded throughout the East for many years.

The original island covered an area of 3.3 acres, which by any stretch of imagination, is a fairly small plot of

## ... we even had pirates

