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FLUSHING

The Night of the Know-It-Alls

By ELLEN BARRY

AT 6 p.m. last Saturday, some 150 people took their positions on the perimeter of the Panorama of the City of New York, an intricate scale model that was commissioned for the 1964 World's Fair. Among them were history buffs, mavens, plane-spotters, savants, parkies, tour guides and the offspring of cabdrivers: a cross-section, in other words, of those New Yorkers who might spend three hours on a Saturday night debating the names of bridges.

They were there for the inaugural Panorama Challenge, which drew some of the city's top trivia hounds to the Queens Museum of Art. The Panorama was commissioned by Robert Moses, and it encompasses 9,335 square feet, ending in a black wall denoting New Jersey. The panorama's scale is 1 inch to 100 feet, meaning that its Empire State Building is 15 inches tall.

As the contestants peered intently at the model, emcees pointed red laser beams at spots in the city and read out 85 clues: In northeast Queens, "used to be known as Vlissingen." On the Queens oceanfront, "the highest percentage of Irish in any ZIP code in America." In the middle of the East River, "the spot where the General Slocum beached." On the south shore of Staten Island, "not Dennis, and not a beer." In South

Brooklyn, "still wooden, and still rattling." Every now and then the test would be interrupted by a public service announcement, such as "Please don't spill beer on the Panorama."

By the second hour, a contestant named Lisa Heller was starting to feel a little slaphappy.

"I was expecting this to be a very small group of senior citizens," she said. But the event's organizers — the City Reliquary, a community museum in Williamsburg, and a tour agency called the Levy's Unique New York! — had apparently tapped a deep vein of fanaticism. Ms. Heller found herself on a team called the Triborough Destroyers, whose leaders approached the competition with ferocious intensity. One teammate, a CNN producer named Sam Meyer, brought along a telephoto lens to zoom in on the tiny landmarks. Mr. Meyer has lived in New York for only four years but was able to eye a bystander standing above southeast Queens and announce, "You are over Runway 31 right."

Still, Mr. Meyer's skills paled beside those of Kevin Walsh, a 49-year-old Flushing man who has made it his life's work to catalog the city's dusty corners. Mr. Walsh's Web site, *Forgotten NY*, is a crossroads for enthusiasts of all sorts — lovers of old streetlights, of tunnels, of faded advertisements painted on brick walls — and his knowledge and enthusiasms are collected in his book, "Forgotten New York: The Ultimate Urban Explorer's Guide to All Five Boroughs."

Mr. Walsh acknowledged that on the one hand, he had done little to prepare for the

night's event. "I'm not making a brag, but I wrote the book," he said. On the other hand, given his credentials, he could not afford to lose.

Mr. Walsh cruised through the first round of 30 questions with confidence. But by No. 85, the questions had gotten devilish: What spot in lower Manhattan was "the source for the ground zero flag?" What could they mean by pointing the laser pen south of the Flushing fairgrounds and commenting, simply, "Baaaaa?"

When the answer was finally read aloud — the Queens Farm — Mr. Walsh could not help protesting. "That's not it!" he bellowed. "It's Jamaica Subway Yard!" But it hardly mattered; with 83 out of 85 questions answered correctly, the Triborough Destroyers had tied for first place with a team called the Dead Rabbits. Mr. Walsh left with his friends; what he felt, he said, was not so much joy as relief.

Another contestant, an illustrator's agent from Park Slope named Jeffrey Briggs, was coming to terms with the fact that his knowledge of New York was less complete than he had imagined. When Mr. Briggs moved here, at 17, he was infatuated with the city. In the 26 years that have passed, he said, his relationship with New York has followed the arc of a marriage, veering occasionally toward rupture but always, somehow, surviving.

The night in Queens — being near the true masters — had been thrilling, he said. Here was another lesson: "Living in New York, you have to get used to being around people smarter than you are."



Joe Formicola for The New York Times

In the shadow of the Panorama of the City of New York, questions and answers.