

# BOOZE, BOATS AND BRAINS

BY JOHN H. VARGO, PUBLISHER

Every once in a while, a story comes to my attention that is so good you just have to stop what you're doing and get going on it as fast as possible.

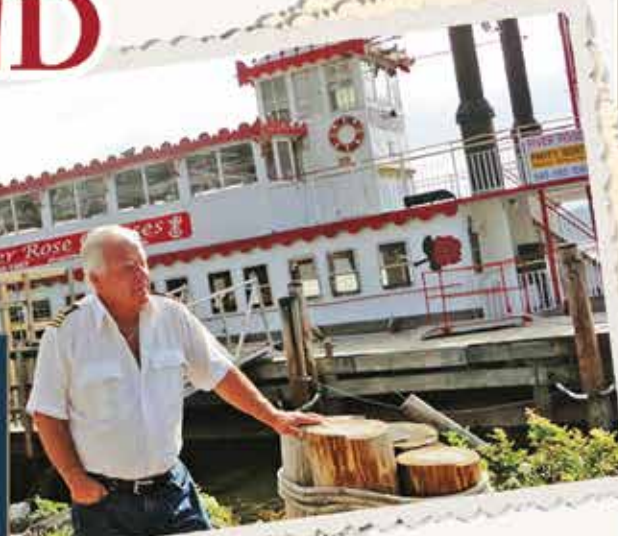
This story includes the Battleship Missouri, an 85-year-old case of unopened Black and White Scotch and the River Rose Sternwheeler.

Most importantly,  
IT IS ABOUT CAPTAIN  
JOHN "DUKE" PANZELLA!

Duke is the owner and captain of the River Rose, arguably the most successful Hudson River day excursion boat on the Hudson River in recent memory! It has been voted number one cruise boat on the Hudson River by Reader's Choice Magazine for ten years in a row!

Operating out of Newburgh's Waterfront for over 20 years the River Rose Sternwheeler, religiously provided day trips on the Hudson River to any and all groups that requested them.

I received a telephone call from Duke, whom I have known for at least 30 years to come to his 80th Birthday party to be held at his home. The day of the birthday party turned out to be a beautiful fall day, bright blue sky, no wind!



The focus of the birthday party was covered in red cloth and placed on a table next to Duke's winterized pool. He insisted I be there before three o'clock as that was when he was going to show everyone at the party the surprise, he had in store for them.

Promptly at three, everyone gathered around, and Duke, after making a short speech, uncovered an unopened case of Black and White Scotch. The case had a very loose piece of wire wrapped around it, with a nail down top. On the side of the case were the faded words, *BLACK AND WHITE SCOTCH WHISKEY, JAMES BUCHANAN & CO. LTD. GLASGOW, SCOTLAND.*



Duke on right with friend Manny on left about to open eighty five year old case of scotch.

I did not stay long after the grand opening, however. This turned out to be a fascinating story for sure. It really begins with Duke's Father, Frank, as well as Duke's grandfather Nick.



BLACK AND WHITE  
SCOTCH WHISKEY,  
JAMES BUCHANAN & CO. LTD.  
GLASGOW, SCOTLAND

Captain Duke Panzella, second from right, holding up shot glasses of 85 year old Black and White Scotch! Duke just opened the case for the first time!

As background here is what was going on in the nineteen thirties. Disenchantment with Prohibition had been building almost from the moment it first took effect in nineteen twenty. Politicians continued drinking as everyday people were slapped with charges. Bootleggers were becoming rich on the profits of illegal alcohol sales and violence was on the rise. But it wasn't until the Great Depression that the repeal movement truly gained steam. At this time there was an estimated 20,000 speakeasies, operating within the New York City limits. Everyone and anyone who had the will could find a drink! Yet individuals were indeed prosecuted to the full extent of the law if caught selling or distributing alcohol.

**Frank Panzella**, Duke's Father, was an upstanding part of society! He operated a funeral home. However, like father like son, Frank Panzella was a bootlegger and most assuredly the best in the business at the time.

His technique was to use his legitimate business as a cover. What Frank was doing and encouraged by Nick Panzella, Frank's father, was moving caskets around the Bronx, filled with booze, not bodies.

While the general population was still struggling with the Depression and trying to survive, economically, the bootleggers, Nick Panzella and Frank Panzella, were making money.

Frank began his married life, living in the Bronx! He had gone to embalming school and became a funeral director. **Nick Panzella** was deeply involved in the illegal Speakeasy trade! He talked his son, Frank, into helping out his bootlegging operation in this unusual way.

Frank, while having a legitimate funeral business, was also following in his father's footsteps!





Pressure on the bootleggers was building to the point that in 1932, Duke's Father decided to get out of the business while the getting was good! He moved his family to Marlboro, NY.

In Marlboro, Duke's father found a piece of property that had a Hickory Tree growing on it. Near the tree, He built a gas station from logs. Once built he added additional products inside the station. At first gas was 11 cents per gal. Besides gas he sold cigarettes for 20 cents. Candy was 05 cents a bar. The gas station was called the "Lone Hickory" because of the only hickory tree on the property.

Duke's Father kept improving the property over the next 9 years. By this time the family had a daughter, "Thelma" (who provided much of this background information).

In following years, The Lone Hickory gas station and candy store grew, as Duke's Father, added on a restaurant that included a dance floor.

In 1939, the 21st amendment, that created Prohibition was lifted Duke's father turned the entire operation into a legal Bar. With the same name, The Lone Hickory! Duke's Mother helped at the "Lone Hickory" while Thelma hardly ever visited them, keeping away from that way of life.

World War Two did not have an impact on the Panzella's until the selective service, running out of men to induct, began drafting married men with children.

By the time 1941 rolled around, the selective service had begun taking fathers with families into the service. Duke's father was drafted! In cleaning up his affairs, before leaving he sold the "Lone Hickory"! At age 37 he left behind a 12-year-old daughter, Thelma, Duke's father an unknown to his father a pregnant wife.

Before he left for World War Two duty and while selling the "Lone Hickory" Frank gave the case of Black and White Scotch to his wife, and said, we will open this case when I get home!"



Captain Duke Panzella, holding first bottle of 85 year old Black and White Scotch from just opened case!

Duke's father was assigned to the Battleship Missouri. He left unaware that his wife was pregnant. Duke was born on December twenty-eight, nineteen forty-two. His father served on the Battleship Missouri as an anti aircraft gunner. While defending the ship, and strapped into his gun, the concussion was so great it burst his appendix! He was sent to Hawaii to recover. Finally recovered he went back to the Missouri but was not allowed near the guns. He spent the rest of the war in the galley. From the day Duke's father left in 1943 until he returned home in 1945, He served four years in the US Navy without ever coming home on leave, not once!

Finally, the war to end all wars was over. The Men were coming home by the thousands to joyous enthusiastic hometowns everywhere. Treated as hero's and idolized by everyone who heard their stories.

The word had spread that Duke's Father and other men from the Marlboro area were on their way home for good. The war to end all wars was over!

Duke now three and a half years old, and his mother had many discussions as how he would recognize his father.

A bus dropped off the sailors! Not to worry amongst the group of victorious sailors who arrived was Frank, Duke's Father. Duke ran directly to his father and threw his arms around him. Life was returning to normal once again.

Duke idolized his father! He vividly recalls his nightly baths. And, as his father sat on the edge of the tub, asking him questions about his years in the navy.

One story that Duke never forgot was when the Battleship Missouri acted as the Japanese surrender location, which ended World War Two.

As Duke recalled the story, Frank, Duke's Father was sitting astraddle one of the sixteen-inch guns above the surrender ceremony itself. The Japanese were to arrive in the afternoon however,

General Macarthur, not trusting the Japanese change the time to morning. After the Ceremony there was a tremendous party on board the ship. The war was over!

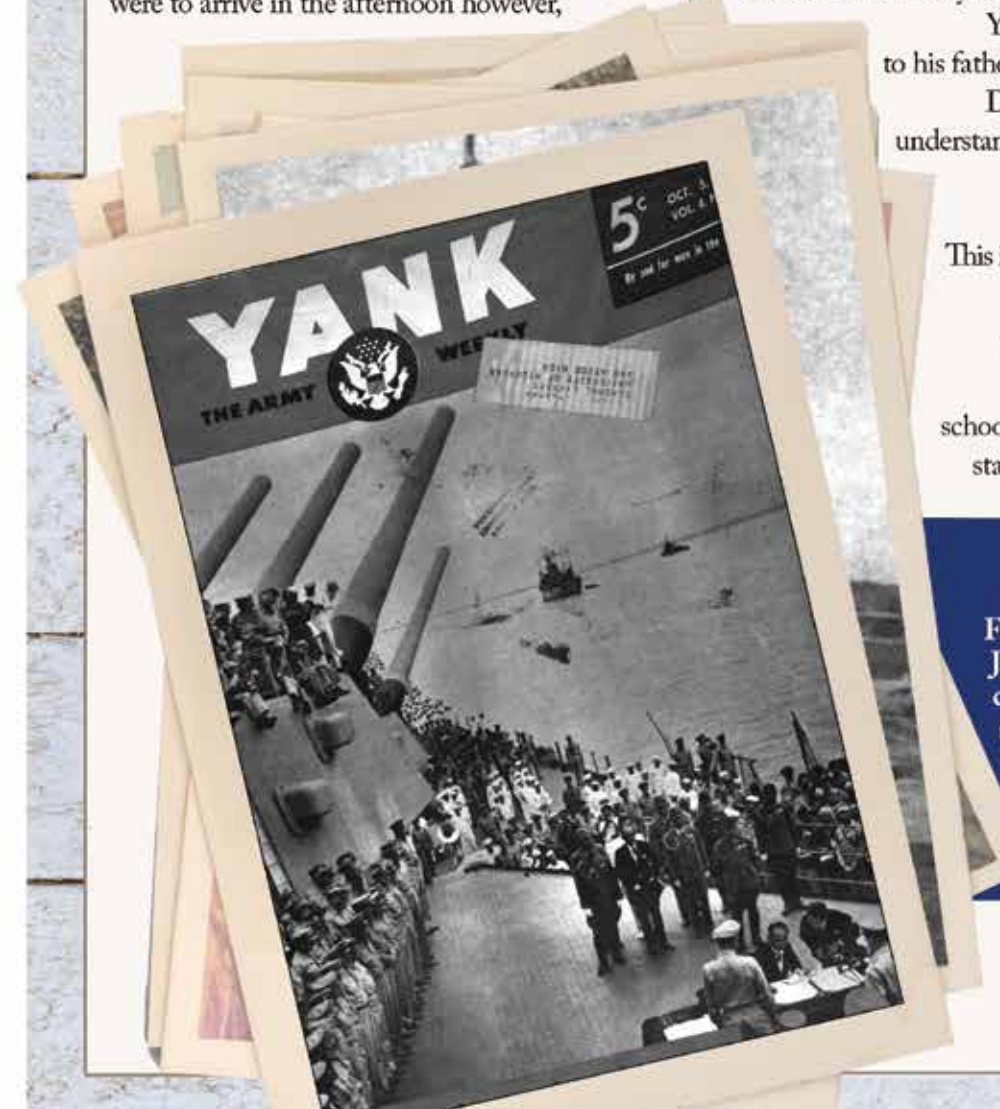
Frank, Duke's father, eventually went on to buy a variety store in Marlboro. By the time Duke was seven years old, he was following his father around the store, asking questions, and being treated by his father as if he was an adult! Because of this adoration Duke learned best business practices at an early age. This grounding gave Duke the means to move forward later in life.

The variety store prospered. It was not long before Frank joined the Marlboro Yacht Club. Between the Variety store, school the Marlboro Yacht Club, all connected to his father in one way or another, Duke picked up the basic understanding that supported the rest of his career in life.

This included being connected to the water and boats.

Now in the late 50's and 16 years old in middle school in Marlboro, one story stands out above all others.

Duke's father, Frank was above the Japanese surrender ceremony, near the sixteen inch guns.





Lunchtime at Marlboro High School usually found all the students milling around the schoolyard. When Duke went outside and found the schoolyard empty, he asked what happened? He was told that one of the students; Lewis had declared that he was going to swim across the Hudson.

The high school was about a mile away from where the event was taking place, near the Marlboro Yacht Club. Duke ran the mile down to the river, saw the crowd all pointing and shouting that Lewis was in trouble. Quickly grasping the situation, Duke ran over to the adjacent Marlboro Yacht club, jumped into a rowboat, and reached Lewis just in time.

Lewis was very tired. By backing down on to Lewis, Duke had him hold on to the stern of the boat. Unfortunately, the boat was too small and shaky for Duke to get out of his rowing position and help Lewis into the boat.

While this was taking place Frank heard about the commotion, got to the Marlboro yacht club, and with the help of another man, went out in their 16 ft. outboard to help his son with Lewis.

The timing was perfect all round, Lewis was saved!

A few weeks later, Frank asks Duke to come with him to the American Legion Club in Marlboro. Told to sit in the car and wait until his father gave him word to enter the American Legion hall, Duke was given a standing ovation, and a medal for this heroic deed.



The medal that Duke received for saving Lewis' life

After high school Duke worked as a plumber's helper for seventy-five cents an hour. The plumber, Ray Waily, and Duke, even though very young, got along very well. Unfortunately for Ray, a serious case of Emphysema was slowing him down. While all this was going on Ray also saw another business opportunity that he could not pass up. He developed a water softening business. The wells in the area contained problems that only a steady supply of water softener conditioning would solve. Now Duke was spending more time helping Ray with the Water Softening business than the plumbing business. This went on continuously until Ray and his Emphysema forced Ray to tell Duke he was going to sell his businesses! Duke immediately said, I will buy your businesses.

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Ray, thinking about it said, "Can you get up the money?"

Duke said, "let me go talk to my folks, and see if they will loan me the money!"

Sure enough, Duke's father lent his son the fifteen hundred dollars down payment and the Panzella Water Softening Business was born.

Now nineteen-year-old, Duke continued to do exactly what he had been doing for the past two years, but now he owned the company!

While all this was going on, Frank sold the Variety Store in Marlboro. He offered it to Duke, but the son wanted no part of it.

Here is where the story gets very interesting as Duke's father, now retired had nothing to do, he spent just about every day traveling the route with his son. Of course, everyone assumed that the father owned the business, and the son was helping. It gets better as Duke's Mother became the bookkeeper, planning each day's route.

Duke owned the Panzella Water Softening Company for almost 30 years! He sold the business when he was 50 years old.

The Panzella Water softening Company had many regular customers, however one stood out above all others and that was none other than Floyd Patterson the famous boxer. Duke became such good friends with Floyd that he regularly became a part of Floyd's Three round sparring partners. As the relationship grew between the two, Duke would get a front row seat at his many fights.

Now, with time on his hands he purchased 90 Broadway in Newburgh. By changing the building around, he developed it into Rocky's Broadway Café. A bar and nightclub that he operated for the next ten years. Rocky's Broadway Café was eventually rented out and continued for a number of years.

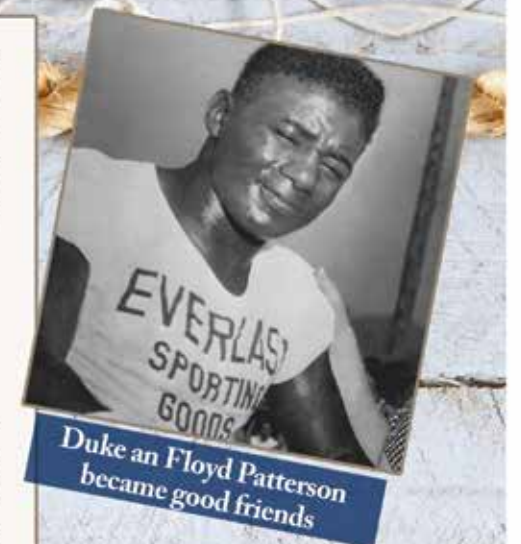
By the time the eighties rolled around Duke had enough. He did a complete one eighty, renting out the building as a church called, "Church At The Bridge, with Pastor Jose operating it. To this day it is still a Church!

Throughout Duke's life, as one birthday passed and another forgotten promise of opening the sealed case of scotch passed, Duke, somehow never got around to opening the case

In 2001 Frank drove Duke to Stewart Airport as he usually did each year for Duke's annual winter break in Florida. No sooner had Duke landed in Florida than he received a telephone call from his family that his father had died. With that news Duke took the next plane home to arrange for his father's funeral. That event almost caused the case of scotch to be opened but again it never was opened.

Next Chapter

The most significant event in Duke's life was his purchase of the River Rose Sternwheeler!



Duke and Floyd Patterson became good friends



River Rose Greeting



One of many couples that were married on the River Rose



He operated it for over 20 years out of Newburgh, NY. This boat became Duke's focus morning, noon, and night. The pure fun of greeting thousands of people as they came on board, taking the time to answer their questions, then greeting the same people on another visit, as they were so satisfied the first time, is what Duke lived for!

From having Pete Seeger, on board for his 90th birthday party, to hundreds of others who came time after time, Duke's life became one big happy party.

The River Rose has not operated as a charter boat for the past two years. Duke, being Duke decided that he was going to do something about it... and he did.

The River Rose Sternwheeler is getting a new lease on life. An agreement has been made between the North River Boat Yard in Nyack, NY and Duke to rebuild the boat to Coast Guard Specifications. With this agreement in place as the work goes on throughout the Winter months, the Coast Guard will oversee the rebuild, step by step. By spring if all goes well, and with Coast Guard approval, Duke will once again be a very happy man. The River Rose will be back on the Hudson River!

The question before us is why would an eighty-year-old man want to go through the trouble of rebuilding the River Rose Sternwheeler, arguably the most significant event in his very interesting life?

Dukes, answer, may surprise you but in reality, he said:

Capt. Duke Panzella...  
doing what he does best,  
enjoying the company of  
his on board guests!

“It keeps me forever young! Operating the River Rose was the most joyous thing I ever did, 'Further there was 12 bottles of unopened Scotch in that 85 year old case. I opened one this year and promised myself that every year for the next 11 years I will open another bottle from the case on my birthday while enjoying the Hudson River on the River Rose!’”

Duke had one more comment:  
“All my prayers have been answered, as you know by now, I'm blessed, it's something that comes over me. It could never be explained, only God has the power to answer prayers!”

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