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Local Dancer
Competes At
Nationals, World Cup

Page 8



Local Man Rising
In Highland Games
Rankings

Page 9

12

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Mount A MAD Lab researchers solve Titanic mystery on PBS's History Detectives

When the PBS program History Detectives came across a mystery it could not solve, it turned to the experts at the Mount Allison University Dendrochronology Lab (MAD Lab) for help - the first time the show has gone outside the U.S. to find its experts.

History Detectives aims to find the facts behind folklore, family legends, and interesting objects.

The object in question in this case was a wooden double picture frame. Family lore held that the frame was made from the stair-rail of a famous sunken ship, but one family member believed it was the Lusitania, another, the Titanic.

To settle the debate, the family approached History Detectives, which in turn sought out Dr. Colin Laroque, head of the MAD Lab and an expert in dendrochronology - the science of tree rings.

Most people know you can tell how old a tree is by counting the number of rings, but tree rings also offer a lot of other information, if you know what to look for.

"We use dendrochronology, or tree-ring analysis, to give us insight into past climates, past ecosystem dynamics, and even past human activities over hundreds of

years," says Laroque, whose team has also dated some other interesting old objects, including a hockey stick, a violin, and a canoe.

With help from three students from the department of geography and environment - Cecilia Jennings, Emily Hogan, and Bryan Mood - Laroque began to unravel the mystery.

The grandfather of the family in this story worked on a boat that rushed to rescue the survivors of a sinking ship. Unfortunately, by the time they arrived, all that was left were the bodies and the wreckage. The grandfather's friend, the ship's carpenter, collected some of the beautiful wood - oak and teak - from which the ship was made. He carved a picture frame using wood from the railing of a grand staircase that led to the ship's ballroom and gave it to the grandfather as a gift.

"It was a challenge because we had to do our analysis without the actual object, instead using scanned images," explains Laroque. "We needed to work out where the oak was from because if we did that we could be pretty certain of which ship it was. The Lusitania was built using wood from Scotland, while the Titanic was built with

wood from Ireland."

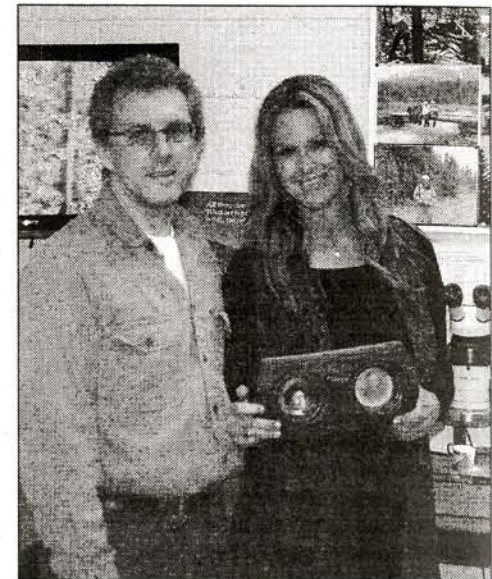
The Titanic was one of three luxury ocean liners, known as the Olympic-class, built in the early 20th century. The MAD lab scientists compared the wood from the stair rail with other wood from the sister ships. They also went farther afield, analyzing wood from other ships built around that time.

"It was pretty exciting because if it did turn out to be from the Titanic, it would be pretty valuable as there are not that many items left that did not go down with the ship," Laroque says.

The team also went above and beyond analyzing the wood and helped the PBS crew set up a number of shots when it came to Sackville to film parts of the show.

"We got people in Amherst to remake the handrail picture frame and gathered items for an ocean shot of flotsam in Halifax, part of a reenactment of the sinking," Laroque says.

In the end, Laroque and his team were able to solve the mystery, but they are not revealing the answer just yet. They say you will have to tune in to watch the episode of History Detectives airing Tuesday, Aug. 7 on PBS to find out.



Elyse Luray, right, of PBS's History Detectives, brought this picture frame, made from the stair rail of a famous sunken ship, to Dr. Colin Laroque, left, head of the Mount Allison Dendrochronology Lab (MAD Lab), to see if he could determine if the wood came from the Titanic or the Lusitania.