

Titanic Resources

ISLE MADAME, NS –

by Silver Donald Cameron

The most astonishing fact about cultural resources is their endless capacity to astonish. The second most astonishing fact is that we continuously undervalue them.

In 1972, a curly-headed pre-teen solemnly plays the fiddle at a concert in Glendale which features 200 Cape Breton fiddlers. Nice looking kid. Serious about his music. Twenty-five years later this lad turns out to be John Morris Rankin, one of the kids who morphed into The Rankin Family.

Or take an innocuous children's book published in 1908. Ninety years later, *Anne of Green Gables* and Lucy Maud Montgomery are an industry. Or take the brothers Paul and Michael Donovan, who in the 1970s delivered *The Globe and Mail* in Halifax office towers, returning to those offices later in the day to pitch for financing to make films – films? – in Halifax. Today Salter Street Films has produced a dozen features and several TV series, including *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and film is a \$60 million-plus industry in Nova Scotia.

And who would have thought that a deck chair from a sunken ship and a row of headstones in an old cemetery would become a major tourist attraction? But, as the thirst for all things Titanic sweeps the world, Halifax is poised to slake it. For a price.

There are, after all, not many places for a Titanic pilgrim to visit. It takes three long hours for a research submarine to sink to the wreck itself, and only five such subs exist. But the dead were brought ashore in Halifax, and more than 200 are buried here. James Cameron based his own Titanic expedition here, and shot the dockside scenes of the film on Halifax Harbour, using local actors and technicians. The Halifax-Titanic connection has become famous, featured in publications from *People* magazine to the *Riyadh Daily* in Saudi Arabia. *Hard Copy* alone showed it to 20 million TV viewers.

Yesterday and Saturday Halifax held a "Titanic weekend," and tomorrow evening – on the 86th anniversary of the sinking – the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic will officially open its new permanent exhibition of Titanic artifacts. The exhibit includes photos and documents, ancient jerky motion pictures, sections of the ship's balustrade and panelling, and a single deck chair brought ashore by rescuers. There's even a poster advertising tickets for the ship's April 20 return trip from New York.

Tourists don't come to Nova Scotia in April – but the exhibit is already drawing overflow crowds, and the Museum is expanding it. Tour companies are booking busloads of Bostonians and New Yorkers. The city is scrambling to upgrade the Fairview Cemetery.

"A graveyard as a tourist attraction," mutters one Haligonian. "Strange old world."

Indeed. But Nova Scotians have not fully appreciated the depth and power of their cultural and heritage resources – nor have we yet done enough to nurture them. A recent example: Malachy Salter (1715-1781) was a colorful and enigmatic founder of the Halifax business community – a privateering shipowner, importer, sugar refiner, justice of the peace, longtime MLA and possibly a smuggler and a spy. Salter Street is named for him. His home stood at the corner of Salter and Hollis, and was probably built before Captain George Vancouver even reached the BC coast. It was the first office of Salter Street Films, and also the setting of their 1980 feature film *Siege*. Last fall, it was demolished without a murmur of protest.

Oddly enough, I understand that. I own a classic 19th-century house and an abandoned general store on waterfrontage, and there's a public interest in preserving them, too. But I can't figure out how I'd recover the cost of restoring them. As a community, we need mechanisms to sweeten the returns for investment in preservation. The alternative is demolition of the irreplaceable.

Don't expect quick improvements. During the recent provincial election, the Nova Scotia Cultural Network polled 150 candidates, noting that Statistics Canada says culture is now a \$447 million industry, with a bigger impact on the provincial economy than fishing and forestry combined, and that cultural employment is growing at 20% annually. But no party demonstrated a serious commitment to growing the industry – not even the NDP, which is utterly infested with long-haired bohemian weirdo deviant cultural types.

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