

Attic proves treasure trove at maritime museum

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There's no telling what forgotten treasures await in the attic, particularly if it's in the Maritime Museum of B.C.

Museum curator John MacFarlane recently stumbled across some scraps of old wood, a hunk of iron and a knotted rope at the museum. "Eureka" was not the first thing that came to his mind.

"Every day we are offered bits and pieces of what people say come from old ships. I think we have everything up to and including bits of Noah's Ark here," said MacFarlane. "At first I am a little hesitant."

That hesitancy dispelled quickly when he tracked where this load of rubbish came from and who discovered it.

MacFarlane had found a significant bit of Canadian history of the high Arctic and the search for the Northwest Passage.

"We were rationalizing the museum collection — which was getting so large — and then I was looking at these things and lo and behold, I was holding tangible links to history in my hand."

The four items were collected by RCMP officer Henry Larsen, who sailed the RCMP vessel St. Roch through the Northwest Passage a half century ago.

He documented each piece and exactly where it came from and then cross-referenced it to known locations of Arctic explorers.

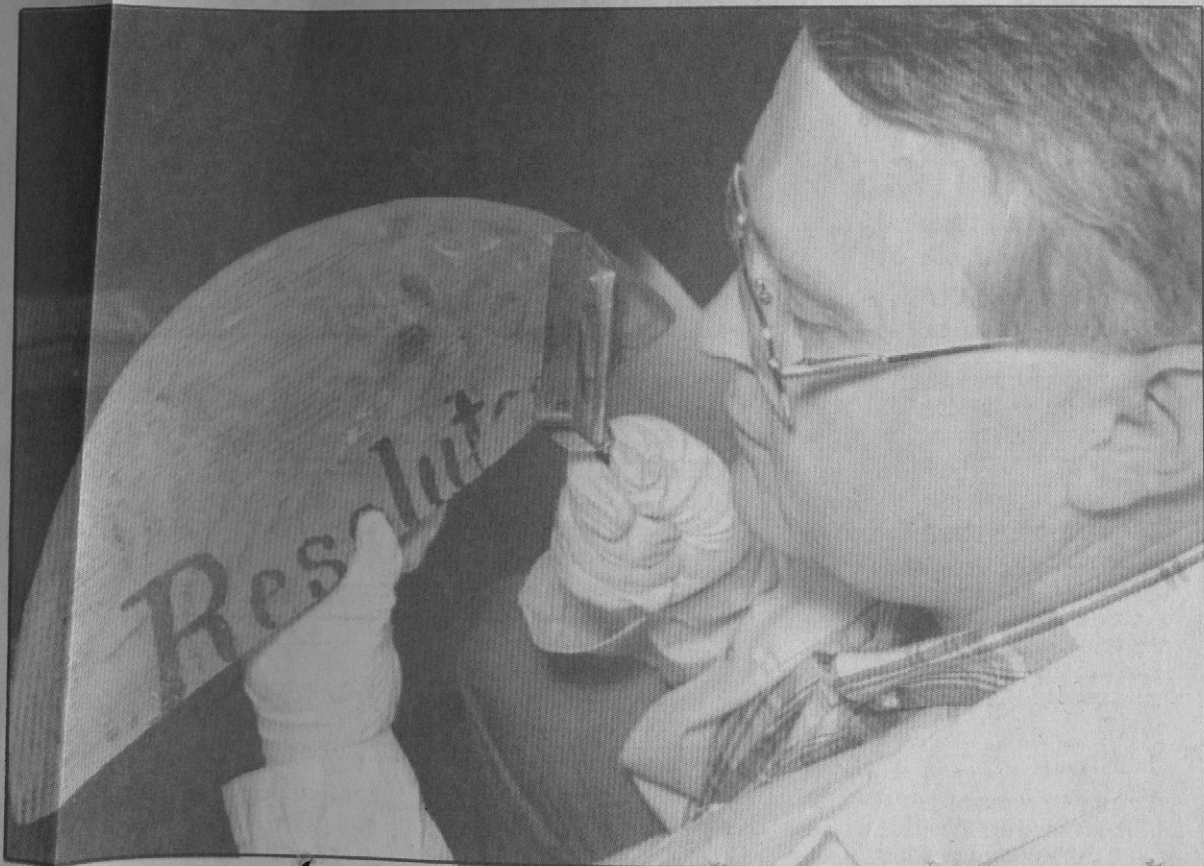
There is a section of a barrel head left by Royal Navy explorer Henry Kellett in 1855. He was searching for the lost John Franklin expedition.

Kellett's ship, the Resolute, was caught in ice and he abandoned it and left a cache of food in the marked barrels.

While Kellett went overland to return to civilization, the Resolute stayed afloat and was salvaged by a U.S. ship the next year.

Also among the artifacts is an engine bearing from the abortive attempt of John Ross to take a paddle steamer through the passage in 1829. He abandoned and dismantled the ship, but not before claiming the Arctic for England at Possession Bay.

Finally, there is a ship's rib and a rope from Roald Amundsen's explorations of the Arctic in 1906. They were found at Gjoa Harbor.



■ John MacFarlane fondles his treasure, a portion of a food cache from the HMS Resolute.

John McKay/Times-Colonist photo