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## **Stratford-based company producing docudrama on Irish Famine immigrants**

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A Stratford-based production company, Ballinran Productions, is releasing a documentary, Summer of Sorrow, on artifacts unearthed in Toronto connected to the Irish Famine.

The docudrama is being produced for History Television in Canada and RTE, Ireland's public broadcaster.

In late 2006, archeologists at a site at King and John streets discovered artifacts that provide clues to what happened in the summer of 1847, when Toronto was besieged by the influx of 38,000 Irish Famine immigrants. The refugees, many of them sick and dying, tripled the population from 20,000 to 58,000 in just a few months.

Fever sheds to treat the new arrivals were constructed at the corner of King and John streets, on the grounds of Toronto's first hospital.

"It is estimated that more than 1,000 people died there," states a press release. "To put this in perspective, if a disaster of the same proportion hit Toronto in the summer of 2007, over 42,000 people would die."

Among the items found is a copper badge in the shape of an Irish harp, lice comb, pipe bowls, glass buttons and a toothbrush. The film's production crew was granted exclusive access to film the excavation.

The story of what happened that summer in Toronto is of particular interest to Craig Thompson, executive producer of Ballinran Productions, which is co-producing the docudrama with Dublin-based Tile Films.

"I've always had a fascination with Irish history since my ancestors were among those who came to Canada during that period," said Thompson, in the press release. "They were among the lucky ones since they survived and prospered. I wanted to find the larger story of what happened that summer of 1847."

Thompson is also motivated by a desire to focus attention on local history.

"Too often, local history is overlooked or dismissed as not being interesting enough when the opposite is true. The artifacts discovered by the archeologists help us tell a story of incredible drama filled with tales of heroism and personal sacrifice."

Archeological Services Inc., the company that carried out the dig, is working with the filmmakers to help interpret the artifacts uncovered. Additional archeological digs are being contemplated and researchers for the film have identified two other sites in Toronto which may hold additional clues.

Production of the docudrama coincides with the opening this June of Ireland Park Toronto. The park, located at the foot of Bathurst Street, will commemorate the victims and survivors of the Irish Famine who came to Toronto. The park will be opened on June 21, 2007, by the president of Ireland.

On Feb. 24, a series of sculptures by the Irish artist Rowan Gillespie will be unveiled in Dublin before they are shipped to Toronto for installation in the new park.

Production of Summer of Sorrow represents a major investment on the part of History Television, the Canadian Television Fund and Telefilm Canada as well as the provincial and federal television tax credit programs.

"This is an exciting and important project for us," said Cindy Witten, vice president of content for History Television, in the press release.

"We are committed to raising awareness and helping preserve the history hidden beneath our streets.

"This is a terrific opportunity to participate in original research and archeology and investigate an important part of Toronto's past."