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Irish famine migrants' history dug up in film

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By Martin Roberts

TORONTO, Jan 24 (Reuters Life!) - Under Toronto's theater district lie the ruins of a hospital where hundreds of refugees from the Irish famine of 1847 died after arriving in Canada on crowded and unsanitary ships.

Little is known of many of the famine victims but a new documentary is hoping to put names and faces to some of those who died and highlight the plight of more than 38,000 migrants who poured into what was then a town of just 20,000 people.

A recent archeological dig has helped shed more light on their fate, uncovering remains of the hospital and artifacts from the period when an estimated 1,100 Irish migrants died.

"When they left Ireland, their journey had only just begun and some of the worst terror was yet to come," said historian Mark McGowan, principal of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto.

McGowan is historical consultant to the Ireland Park Foundation, which is building a memorial to the famine victims on the waterfront where they arrived. It is due to be opened by Irish President Mary McAleese in June.

Planning permission for the memorial was first granted in 2000 and inspired local filmmaker Craig Thompson to begin work on the history of the famine victims.

"I've been fascinated with Irish history for years, so to be able to document a compelling story like this is a remarkable opportunity," Thompson said.

It was a decision by the Toronto International Film Festival to build a new center that gave archeologists a rare chance to dig for remains of the the old General Hospital.

"It was a fortunate coincidence," said Ron Williamson, of local specialists Archeological Services Inc., who led excavations on the site.

FORTHCOMING DOCUMENTARY

Thompson's Ballinran Productions filmed the excavations, which will be the basis for a two part drama documentary, "Summer of Sorrows," to be screened early next year on Canada's History Television and Irish state broadcaster RTE.

The producers aim to put names and faces to the migrants, using artifacts found at the Toronto excavation, and archive material from hospitals, parish churches, ships and contemporary officials' personal records that have since come to light.

McGowan said 100,000 migrants embarked in Ireland for Canada in 1847, with officials in Canada underestimating the problem.

The migrants sailed on reconditioned cargo ships on voyages lasting six to eight weeks, during which hatches would often have been closed during bouts of rough North Atlantic weather.

"Cooking times were restricted. If you couldn't cook above decks you ate it raw, so diarrhea was common, as was "ship's fever," or typhus, so it was pretty miserable," he said.

Some Torontonians cared for sick migrants at the cost of their own lives, including George Grasset, chief medical officer at the General Hospital, who died from fever.

Robert Kearns, a businessman whose lobbying efforts got the memorial project under way, said up to a further 2,000 migrants may have died inside a 100 mile radius of Toronto within six months of landing.

"We know men and women were dropping dead in the towns and villages from exhaustion and typhus," said Kearns, a native of Dublin and an archeology graduate.

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