



Hidden Artifacts from Irish Famine Unearthed for New Docudrama

(Toronto, January 24, 2007) Artifacts recently discovered in a downtown archeological dig shed new light on the most traumatic event in the history of Toronto – a story that is the subject of a major international docudrama currently in production.

Summer of Sorrow, being produced for History Television in Canada and RTE, Ireland's public broadcaster, tells the story of how Toronto was besieged by the influx of 38,000 Irish Famine immigrants in the summer of 1847. The refugees, many of them sick and dying, tripled the population from 20,000 to 58,000 in just a few months.

To treat the new arrivals, fever sheds were hastily 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. 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.

In late 2006, archeologists at the King and John site unearthed artifacts that provide clues to what happened that summer. Among the remarkable items found is a copper badge in the shape of an Irish harp, lice combs, pipe bowls, glass buttons and a toothbrush.

The production crew was granted exclusive access to film the excavation to bring this unique experience to the public. Additional archeological digs are being contemplated. Researchers for the film have identified two other sites in Toronto, which may hold additional clues.

The story of what happened that summer in Toronto is of particular interest to Craig Thompson, Executive Producer of Ballinran Productions, the company 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," says Thompson. "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."

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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. 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 February 24th, 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,” says Cindy Witten, Vice President of Content for History Television. “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.”

Ballinran Productions Limited has been specializing in factual and lifestyle programming since 1993. History Television is an Alliance Atlantis Network. For more information on the dig, please visit www.history.ca. A special micro-site on the Irish Famine story can be found at <http://www.history.ca/content/ContentDetail.aspx?Contentid=2172>

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