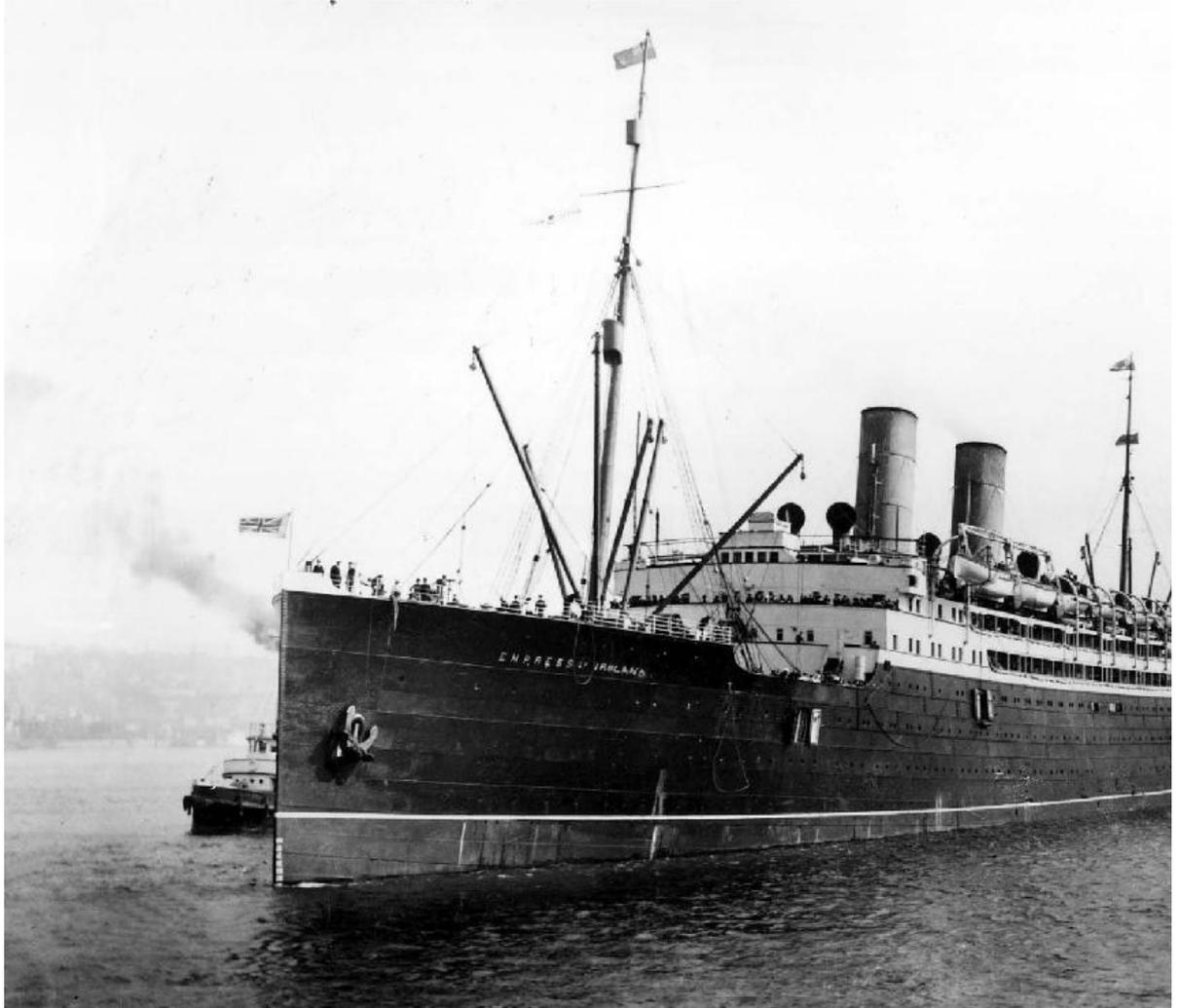


## 'Canada's Titanic' finally getting its due after 100 years (with video)

Empress of Ireland to be commemorated in coming days with stamp, coins, monuments and more

BY THE CANADIAN PRESS, POSTMEDIA NEWS MAY 28, 2014



This is an undated file photo of the "Empress of Ireland". In May 29, 1914 The Canadian Pacific steamship, the Empress of Ireland, collided with a Norwegian freighter near Quebec, 1,012 people.

**Photograph by:** THE CANADIAN PRESS, Postmedia News

MONTREAL — Clinging to the side of a doomed ocean liner, Leonard Delamont wrapped his lifebelt around his mother, kissed her goodbye and jumped into the glacial waves of the St. Lawrence River.

The young man, never to be seen again, was among 1,012 killed that foggy night when the Empress of Ireland collided with a freighter off Quebec's Gaspé Peninsula and plunged beneath the surface in just 14 minutes.

Dubbed "Canada's Titanic," the sinking on May 29, 1914, stands as one of the country's worst maritime disasters, though a surprising number of Canadians have never heard of it.

Compared to the famous story of the Titanic luxury liner that sank two years earlier, the Empress of Ireland's tale has remained in the shadows.

But experts on the ship's history believe the Empress is finally getting its due as the 100th anniversary of the tragedy approaches.

The vessel will be commemorated in the coming days with the release of Canada Post stamps, a pair of silver coins from the Royal Canadian Mint, the launch of a Museum of Canadian History exhibit, the unveiling of a monument and several memorials around the country.

Descendants of those aboard the Empress, like Delamont's niece, hope the centenary will help

further boost public awareness about the liner and its victims.

"A lot of Canadians don't know about it and I guess I would be one of them if I didn't have a family connection," said June Ivany, who plans to attend Empress events this week in Rimouski, Que., near the wreck site.

"It is part of Canadian history and so much is played up about the Titanic. Why not make people aware of our maritime disasters?"

The deadly collision represents only part of the historical significance linked to the steamship, which played a key role in Canada's immigration boom during her years in service, from 1906 until the 1914 tragedy.

Over those years, around 120,000 European immigrants sailed on the prestigious liner to a new life in Canada.

The federal government has estimated about a million Canadians today — or about one in 35 — can trace an ancestor to this ship. Others believe the number is a more modest ratio of one in 60.

But despite its importance the Empress has long been overshadowed by two higher-profile transatlantic sinkings of the same era that also claimed more than 1,000 lives: the Titanic and the Lusitania.

The Titanic struck an iceberg in 1912, killing around 1,500 people, while a German U-boat torpedoed the Lusitania in 1915, killing nearly 1,200.

The horror of the Empress disaster and the tales of survival were splashed on front pages around the world, but weeks later international attention had shifted to the outbreak of the First World War.

As the years passed by, families affected by the Empress disaster — like Delamont's clan — avoided discussing the incident to spare themselves from the painful memories.

"When I was growing up, you didn't talk about it," said Ivany, who also shared her family's story in a posting on a website dedicated to the anniversary

All four of Delamont's relatives aboard the Empress, including his mother Seraphine, were among the fortunate 465 who survived.

Ivany said aside from hearing about her uncle's sacrifice, she also learned about her aunt Elizabeth's experience amid the chaos that surrounded the sinking ship.

"(She) had her hair ripped out by other people in the water," Ivany said of an experience that haunted Elizabeth for the rest of her life.

"She would never even get in a bathtub and was terrified of water."

The sinking also changed the course of history for victims' families.

Donna Parker says she wouldn't be alive if it weren't for the Empress disaster.

Parker's grandfather, Will Clark, lost his first wife, Lavinia, and their nine-year-old daughter, Nellie. She said they had been travelling without him because he had stayed home to work.

Her grandfather later remarried and had two children, eight grandchildren and many great-grandchildren.

"I guess the thing that really affects me is that it's a terribly tragic story, and yet my family would not be here if it weren't for that," said Parker, an Ancaster, Ont., resident who also plans to participate in memorial activities in Rimouski.

"It was our early history ... I just think those people shouldn't be forgotten."

Chris Klausen, who owns one of the biggest collections of Empress of Ireland artifacts, believes history has overlooked the ship because unlike the rich and glamorous who sailed on the Titanic, most of its passengers belonged to the middle class.

"Titanic was like dropping a bomb on the Academy Awards," said Klausen, who started collecting Empress objects in 2000.

He said the commemorative events are signs that the Empress's story has, at long last, started to attract attention.

"There's finally some recognition, there's finally some peace for these families," he said.

To mark the anniversary, the Maritime Museum of BC in Victoria has an exhibit of Klausen's items. It is just one of the several Empress-related events across Canada.

In Rimouski, the Pointe-au-Pere maritime museum, which has a pavilion dedicated to the Empress, will host a banquet and unveil a monument. Churches in Rimouski and nearby Ste-Luce plan to pay homage by ringing their bells in unison at 1:55 a.m., the time of the disaster.

The Salvation Army, which dispatched 170 of its members on the ship to a rally in England, will hold its annual Empress ceremony Sunday at Toronto's Mount Pleasant Cemetery as well as a reception May 31 in Rimouski. The organization lost 141 people, including Delamont, the Clarks and many of its Canadian leaders.

Many aboard the Empress anticipated the journey of a lifetime, but the overseas adventure ended before dawn on their second day.

The Norwegian-built Storstad rammed the Empress under a thick blanket of fog near Father Point, known today as Pointe-au-Pere.

The 167-metre-long Empress, which left Quebec City for Liverpool on May 28, 1914, had dropped off a river pilot and turned northeast toward the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Meanwhile, the Storstad, bound for Montreal, was cruising full speed toward shore to pick up a pilot.

After the collier smashed into its hull, the Empress listed and sank quickly amid the screams of terrified crew and passengers. Only a few lifeboats could be launched and most of the people travelling below deck in third class were thought to have drowned in their bunks.

A front-page story in the Toronto Sunday World on June 2, 1914, described the "butchery" of the mad scramble to escape the lower decks.

The headline read: Steerage Passengers Slain by Comrades in Scramble for Life; Wounds of Victims Tell Tale of Frenzied Struggle for Life in Empress' Steerage Quarters; Knives and Dirks Were Apparently Plied by Crazy Passengers Battling Way Thru Crowded Mass in Fore-hold.

Boats from nearby villages rescued survivors in the darkness, but hundreds died in the water. Villagers clothed and sheltered people scooped from the river.

Only four of the 138 children aboard the Empress survived and the remains of hundreds of people are entombed in her wreck. For days, searchers recovered bodies from the river, though many of the dead could not be identified and were buried in Rimouski.

Loved ones from across Canada headed to Quebec to conduct the grim duty of trying to identify the dead.

Since the sinking, the Empress has continued to claim lives.

Over the years, about a half-dozen sport divers have died near the wreck site, which is nearly 50 metres below the surface.

Derek Grout, who wrote two books on the Empress of Ireland, said the area around the wreckage is known for its poor visibility, strong current and dangerous entanglements, such as electrical wires.

"It's not the place for the faint of heart," said Grout, who authored "Empress of Ireland: The Story of an Edwardian Liner" and "RMS Empress of Ireland: Pride of the Canadian Pacific's Atlantic Fleet."

Even with the hazards, Grout said the Empress was accessible to divers and became one of the most-pillaged shipwrecks in the world.

To protect the Empress from further scavenging, both the province and Ottawa have designated it a historical site.

The ship also took many secrets to the riverbed and some believe it may have been cursed.

The Empress's orange cat, Emmy, jumped off the vessel before it left Quebec City the day before the disaster. Someone caught her and brought her back to the ship, but she ran away a second time, leaving a litter of kittens behind, Grout said.

"Sailors regard that as a terrible omen," he said of losing a ship's cat.

A newspaper report also suggested the ship's captain may have been cursed by a fugitive he helped

authorities capture a few years earlier at Father Point, near the site of the Empress disaster.

Dr. Hawley Harvey Crippen, who was later executed after being found guilty of killing his wife, is said to have cursed Capt. Henry George Kendall upon his capture by a Scotland Yard inspector. At the time, the men were aboard the Montrose liner, which Kendall had captained before the Empress.

Grout believes the Empress has received considerable recognition, even though it never had anything close to the Titanic's Hollywood exposure.

"It doesn't have the sort of nobility, let's say, that the Titanic does, but there's lots of reasons why we should be remembering the Empress," he said.

"Not only because of the 1,000-plus people who lost their lives in less than 14 minutes. We need to remember the ship because of the contribution that it made, along with other ships of the period, to Canada's social and economic development."

Like the Titanic, the Empress had incredible stories of survival and tragedy.

Grout said a stoker working on the Empress had survived the Titanic sinking. That man, William Clark, found his way out of the Empress boiler room after the collision and reached safety once again.

Delamont's sacrifice was featured on the front page of the Toronto World a few days after the disaster under the headline, Heroic Son Gave Life to Save His Mother.

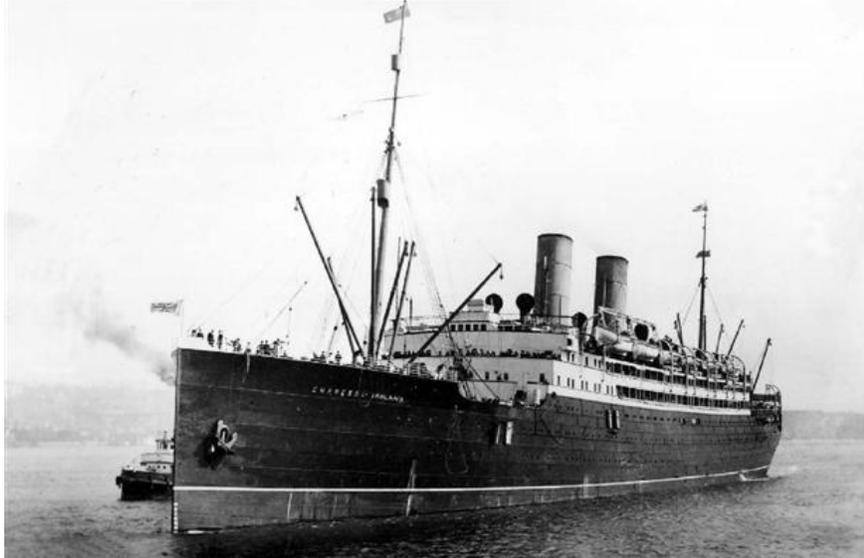
"Feeling the vessel rapidly sinking, the son, a moment later, kissed his mother goodbye and jumping into the water swam off into the darkness to never again be seen alive," said the article, published a few days after the sinking.

Delamont's niece said she enjoys cruises and has participated in many mandatory lifeboat drills — none of which she feels would have been quick enough on the rapidly sinking Empress.

"Just think that that ship sunk in 14 minutes," said Ivany. "I can't imagine it."

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)



This is an undated file photo of the "Empress of Ireland". In May 29, 1914 The Canadian Pacific steamship, the Empress of Ireland, collided with a Norwegian freighter near Quebec, sinking in 14 minutes and killing 1,012 people.

Photograph by: THE CANADIAN PRESS, Postmedia News

