

Railway Coastal Museum e-Bulletin

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The Legendary Hero of the S.S. Ethie

During a winter storm on December 11th, 1919, the coastal boat *S.S. Ethie* met a terrible fate when Captain English was forced to run the ship aground in an area near Martin's Point. While the waves battered the ship, crew members and volunteers from the nearby community raced to help the 92 passengers onboard. Legend has it that a most heroic effort was put forth by a dog that swam out to carry the ship's lines to shore, which ultimately helped save the lives of the 92 passengers. But who was this dog, where did he come from, and was he actually there on that fateful day? This month's e-bulletin will explore the story behind the legend.

When news of the wreck was first published in local newspapers, there was no mention of a dog involved in the rescue. The December 17th, 1919 edition of the *Evening Herald* included an in-depth report of the *Ethie*'s wreck. The paper reported on the hard work of the crew and volunteers from a nearby community, but made no mention of a helpful canine. On the same date, however, the *Western Star* reported that "[a] line was fired from the ship, but got caught up amongst the boulders, so the people of Martin Point sent out one of their dogs, a very sagacious animal, to bring it ashore." Early accounts described the dog as a collie-type dog, but on January 8th, 1920, the *Evening Telegram* reported the involvement of a Newfoundland dog, a breed well known for its swimming ability.



The remains of the S.S. Ethie

Shortly after the incident, this mystery dog became famous, as the Philadelphia Humane Society recognized his heroic act and presented him with a specially made collar featuring a silver plate with the word "Hero" inscribed on it. A WWI veterans' hospital in Halifax also presented the dog with a medal for bravery, which was added to the collar. As the story goes, the dog was eventually sold to a man from New Brunswick who later moved to Alaska, where our hero lived out his life. When the dog died, the owner gave the collar to a young neighbour that had been fond of the pooch. Over time, the collar found its way into the hands of Dottie Olsen in Alaska. Through the magic of the internet and some luck, Dottie came across the legend of the Hero Dog of the S.S. *Ethie* through a site called "The Mysteries of Canada," run by Bruce Ricketts. After some conversing and some research, they determined the collar to be that of the



fabled dog. In 2000 Mr. Ricketts convinced Dottie to loan the collar to the Newfoundland Museum, so that people of the province could experience this legend come to life. Hilda Menchions was 18 months old at the time of the wreck, and was saved by being placed in a mailbag. She was in attendance, along with Charles Furey, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation, on the day the collar was presented to the museum.

Pictured above: Presentation of the legendary collar to Charles Furey, Minister of Tourism, Culture and Recreation (centre), Hilda Menchions (left), and Bruce Ricketts (right). (Courtesy of the Western Star)

Though the collar seems to prove that a dog was partly responsible for aiding the distressed passengers, the legend is still murky. On the day of the wreck there indeed *was* a dog on the beach. He belonged to a man named Reuben Decker, who lived in the nearby community, and he was a collie cross named Wisher, but he did not play a part in the rescue. Despite the uncertainty about the truth of the story, this four-legged hero has made a name for himself. He has been immortalized in a poem by E.J. Pratt called “Carlo,” which you can read on the museum’s website at www.railwaycoastalmuseum.ca/carlo.htm. The Railway Coastal Museum has also based a children’s puppet show on the S.S. Ethie legend, featuring Reuben Decker and his heroic dog, Wisher. So, bring the children on down to the Railway Coastal Museum to check out our take on the S.S. Ethie legend through a fun and exciting puppet show!

Acknowledgement:

From our September e-Bulletin “Railway Coastal Museum Scholarship Winners 2009” we would like to acknowledge and thank the Johnson Family Fund for the scholarship awards.

Do you have a story about the Newfoundland Railway?

We’d love to hear it!

We appreciate any comments, questions, or feedback you may have. If you would also like to subscribe to our Gift Shop mailing list, please contact

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