

NEWS RELEASE - Vancouver Maritime Museum

Initiative to Erect a Statue to Commemorate one of Canada's Greatest Arctic Explorers Begins in Vancouver

Vancouver, BC: May 24, 2005

"I remember very clearly, even though I was just two-years-old, when I first met my father," says Doreen Larsen Riedel, oldest daughter of Henry Larsen. "Here was this huge man in a brown uniform coming down the gang plank off *St. Roch* when I escaped from the hand restraining me and ran to him."

It was October 5, 1937 and the RCMP patrol and supply schooner *St. Roch* had just returned to Vancouver and docked at Evans Coleman Wharf after two and a half years in the Arctic where the ship and its crew had worked as a floating (and occasionally frozen-in) detachment of the RCMP.

In the telling of the story of Captain Henry Larsen, *St. Roch* and its crews, the implications of such a life for the families of Larsen and his crew are left untold. But it is a story the children of RCMP officers, Canadian Coast Guard and Canadian military families are well aware of.

Doreen Riedel, the oldest of Larsen's three children, made a special trip to Vancouver recently to kick off a \$100,000 campaign to build a life-sized statue of Henry Larsen. Unlike other monumental works, this life-sized sculpture will be installed on the deck of *St. Roch*, currently displayed at the Vancouver Maritime Museum, while two other smaller-scale versions can be mounted in other communities or locations. Riedel is currently editing her father's original 1,000-page manuscript, abstracted in the book *The Big Ship*, an autobiography published posthumously in cooperation with Frank Sheer and Edvard Omholt-Jensen. The whole story has never been told, and Riedel's book will hopefully join a statue of her father four decades after his death to acquaint Canadians with a largely forgotten hero.

The statue, commissioned from internationally renowned Salt Spring Island artist Simon Morris, will be a tribute to Larsen and will recognize his career as an explorer and his uniquely Canadian immigrant experience. Larsen and *St. Roch* were the first to make the west to east transit of the Northwest Passage in 1940-1942, and the first to navigate the "deep water route" through Prince of Wales Strait in 1944, a feat that ended in disaster for many previously expeditions. For these epic achievements, *St. Roch* was preserved as a National Historic Site. But the man at the helm, who died an early death after retirement, has not been commemorated.

As an RCMP officer Larsen worked for more than 30 years in the Canadian Arctic. Larsen commented in his writings that, only in Canada, could a young immigrant man like he have

the opportunity to fulfill his wildest dreams.

Born September 30, 1899, on the small Norwegian island of Herfol one of the 500 Hvaler Islands located south of Fredrikstad, Norway, Larsen was orphaned in infancy and raised by family members. Growing up at a time when the great Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was making his way through the Northwest Passage, Larsen developed Arctic fever. He read adventure stories about the Canadian North West Mounted Police and other Arctic explorers, which fired his imagination and left him with a special interest in the Canadian Arctic.



When, as third mate on a Fred Olsen Line ship, the *Theodore Roosevelt*, Larsen met Amundsen and his pilot, Oscar Omdahl in Seattle, it was an opportunity of a lifetime. His friendship with Omdahl made him even more determined to make his way to the Arctic. At age 23, his dream was fulfilled when he signed on *Maid of Orleans* in Seattle as navigator for the Danish Arctic trader Christian Klengenber.

Once in the Arctic, Larsen became acquainted with the Inuit and the RCMP, which he joined in 1927. The rest is history.

When the Second World War broke out, Larsen's request for release from the RCMP to serve in the Canadian armed forces was refused. His services were needed to maintain a supply line to settlements on the Arctic coast and to protect the sovereignty of Canada in the Arctic. He was awarded the 1935 - 1945 Star, the Atlantic and Pacific Star, and the War Medal 1939- as a Merchant Seaman, for captaining *St. Roch* through the Northwest Passage. The first voyage was initiated as part of a then-secret military mission to secure the cryolite mines of Greenland used in the production of aluminium for the war effort.

Among a number of honours, he was awarded the much coveted Polar Medal and Bar, the medal of the Royal Geographic Society, and the first Massey Medal by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society for his contribution to the geography of Canada. Larsen Sound, a body of water located in the Arctic off the west coast of Boothia Peninsula was named for him.

Many of his accomplishments and contributions to Canada are yet to be publicized. His admonishment to an author who attempted to tell the story of *St Roch* was, " All I want is the plain, unvarnished story, factual, without glamour or suspense. I want the simple facts set out without any implication that I or the men under me were in any way heroes or endured notable hardships."

Upon retirement, Larsen expressed his gratitude to Canada for being more than kind to him, saying that he had come to the RCMP as an unknown Norwegian sailor and was leaving it as a superintendent. "What greater honour could I wish for? I had been able to carry out the duties assigned to me: and I had the honour of carrying the Canadian Blue Ensign and the Union Jack both ways through the Northwest Passage for the first time in history."

Throughout the world, as well as in Canada, monumental statues have been erected to commemorate other explorers, military heroes, and national leaders. The idea for a Larsen statue was born in the 1940s when then Vancouver City Archivist Major J.S. Matthews started a campaign for a heroic figure by English sculptor Vernon March. Every other Arctic explorer was commemorated by a statue except Larsen. Matthews saw this as an injustice that needed to be rectified. It has yet to be. The campaign failed; as did a later push to recognize Larsen.



Now, after many years, and in time for the 100th anniversary of the first successful transit of the Northwest Passage by Roald Amundsen, as well as the centennial of Larsen's birthplace, Norway, the idea has revived. In selecting Morris, the statue committee found a sculptor whose life-like work would capture the "real" Henry Larsen, and place him back aboard his ship, in the act of lowering his sextant after taking a sighting while navigating the North. Rather than place Henry on a pedestal, the statue reflects the approachable nature of the self-effacing man who made world history as an adopted son of Canada.

Tax-deductible donations to the Henry Larsen Statue Campaign can be made care of the Vancouver Maritime Museum. Information about the artist, Simon Morris, is available at www.morrissculpture.com. More information about *St. Roch* is on the Museum's website at www.vancouvermaritimemuseum.com.

If you would like more information about the Henry Larsen Statue Committee, contact Marian Toft at 604-985-7566, email mtoft@telus.net.

The Vancouver Maritime Museum tells the stories of Canada's ties to the Pacific with an emphasis on Canada's gateway port communities in the greater Vancouver region. As a centre for life-long learning, the Museum interprets our ongoing interaction with the sea through exhibitions and programs for people of all ages. Visitor information 604 257-8300.

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Contact information:

Marian Toft

Phone 604-985-7566

Email mtoft@telus.net.

Debbie Tardiff

Home office 250 738 0188 Messages 604 734 8914

corporate@vancouvermaritimemuseum.com

Vancouver Maritime Museum, 1905 Ogden Avenue in Vanier Park

Open daily 10 am to 5 pm

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www.vancouvermaritimemuseum.com