

#10

2020

All around her the bulldozers charged, tossed and flattened defenseless landforms like a stampede of belligerent buffalos, destroying antiquity forever...except for the one half-acre in the centre marked off with orange tape.

Oblivious to the mayhem, Jane knelt in the archaeological test pit circled by tape. She had planned on packing up her equipment today and noting nothing of cultural interest in her report to the township of Blackstock.

But at noon, everything changed.

Jane stuck her head back into the freshly-made break in the ground's surface and shone her flashlight around the deep hollow lined with hewn stones. She noted how the mortar remained intact despite the graying of age.

She shone her flashlight around the ancient cellar. The beam flashed on metal. An ancient milk churn?

She felt hot breath on the back of her neck.

"Ma'am, how much longer yer gonna hold the work up?"

The metal-meets-rock tone of the worksite supervisor made Jane pull her head from the hole and jump upright.

"Please tell your crew to stay well away from the orange boundary tape." Jane waved her arm at the tape and hoped her voice conveyed confidence she didn't feel.

The supervisor grunted and strode off towards the now-silent bulldozers, fidgety men, and fresh piles of bulldozed soil.

Something odd caught her attention. Something out of place. Something man-made, not from nature. Jutting out from the disturbed black earth was a small ivory thing.

Swooping up her brush, trowel and sieve, Jane rushed to it, dropped to her knees, and retrieved it with the care of a medieval knight discovering the Holy Grail.

Back in her office at EarthTime Archeology Inc., she examined the object in detail, opened reference books, pulled up databases.

The significance of the object made her heart slow, made her breathing slow, made time slow.

It was an ancient hair comb made of animal bone probably deer antler, probably of Viking origin.

Viking origin.

How did a comb circa 800s from a distant land come to be in rural Ontario today?

Excitement started in her belly, surged up to her heart, jolting her into action.

She cleaned the artifact, measured it, weighed it, took photos, and entered the preliminary observations in her records:

'Double-edged hair comb, 2¾ x 2 and 5½ x 2 inches, made from deer bone, ornamented with concentric circles at each corner, imperfect.'

The land registry was still open, she went there. According to the old records, in 1836 Seamus O'Donnell from Cobh in County Cork, Ireland, petitioned the Ontario government for a land grant on the basis he had served as a United Empire Loyalist. His petition was granted and he was given the 100-acre parcel near Blackstock. His name appeared on the Letters Patent for the property in 1838.

Seamus registered his will with the deed to the land. Nine years later, a certificate of death was also registered - *Death by Misadventure*.

Ryan O'Donnell, his brother, born 1826, last known address Cobh, Ireland, inherited the land. In 1848, Ryan claimed the title.

Jane went home and settled at her computer to search through the online database of Library and Archives Canada.

The historical registry of Marriage Bonds showed that Ryan O'Donnell was married at the Blackstock schoolhouse in 1849 to a Mary Murphy born 1828 in Cork.

Jane searched through the night for Ryan O'Donnell's bride.

Finally, she found her.

A Mary Murphy, 19, had sailed from Cork, Ireland on 9th April 1847 on the ship Lord Seaton and arrived at Grosse-Île Quarantine Station on 21st May 1847. There were five Murphy's listed on the ship's manifest:

Murphy, James, 16, died May 29-June 10

Murphy, Mary, 22, died May 4-10

Murphy, Mary, 19

Murphy, Patrick, 22

Murphy, Thomas, 3 days, son of Patrick Murphy, Labourer, of the Parish of Cobh, County Cork and of Mary (nee Moore); died May 10 on board the Lord Seaton, buried at sea.

The list of *Immigrants at Grosse-Île Quarantine Station 1845-1849* noted 11 Patrick Murphy's and 21 Mary Murphy's. The list of *Names Recorded on the Grosse-Île Quarantine Station Memorial* noted the deaths of 11 Patrick Murphy's and 20 Mary Murphy's.

It took Jane a few seconds to realize the implication of these numbers. Eleven Patrick Murphy's survived the voyage and all eleven died in quarantine. Twenty-one Mary Murphy's survived the voyage but only twenty of them died in quarantine.

She longed for a photo of this resilient woman, Mary Murphy from Ireland, longed to know the face of this widow and bereaved mother.

1847

They were coming for her now. Mary ran across the ship's deck, slipped on the wet planks, fell against the mast, froze. Nowhere to go. She balanced her back on the pole and hugged the little bump inside her coat closer to her chest.

The two sailors confronted her. Dirty. Smelly. The smell of eternity at sea on a crowded ship of filth and sickness.

"No. Yer cannot take 'im." The wind whipped her words away and scattered them over the huge ocean somewhere between Ireland and Canada.

"Sorry lady. It's time." The sailor's teeth were rotted, his breath foul on her face.

The priest came to her side and placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at his wizened face, into his eyes, once kind, now glazed from the suffering they had witnessed.

"Can yer spare a tiny piece o' sail cloth?" Her voice was a prayer-like whisper.

The priest looked at the sailors, raised one eyebrow in a silent question.

One shook his head. "'tis all used up, long ago. So many bodies."

"But moy baby's got no wrap." Mary hugged the tiny bump even closer to her heart.

The priest looked over to a group of men standing around a heap of something. "Sorry, my child, I'm needed elsewhere now." He walked away to the group.

Mary watched him go. Saw the something was a pile of dead bodies. One by one, the men heaved them overboard. The old and the young, men and women, children and babies. The priest muttered a prayer and made a sign of the cross. So many souls to share just one cross and just one prayer.

The two sailors moved closer to Mary. One gripped her arm. The other reached inside her coat to grab her precious bundle. She shrieked.

Mary's husband staggered across the deck. "Leave them be." He punched one of the sailors.

One punched back. Patrick fell to the ground. He struggled to get up but fell again, his gaunt face straining up, pleading. So weak from sickness.

The priest returned, held up his hands to the sailors. "In the name of God, show some mercy."

A woman approached Mary. "This'll keep 'im warm". The woman slipped a woollen shawl off her shoulders. She reached into Mary's coat for the naked newborn and wrapped him in the shawl taking care to cover his tiny blue face.

Mary reached out to caress her son one last time. " 'is name is Thomas. Thomas Patrick Murphy."

Early one morning a lone seagull circled the ship three times and announced its arrival with a call long and haunting.

The next day, two more gulls joined it on the rigging.

"Land ahoy!"

Them that could, struggled up on deck and went to the bow. Mary and Patrick joined them. Bent bodies, gaunt grey faces all in a row strained forward to see, hear, through the morning mist.

The sound was faint at first then more distinct. The sound of waves breaking on rocks.

Shoulders lifted, heads jerked up, a prayer, a sigh, a smile.
Hope.

1873

Mother and daughter made bread together on the wooden table. Mary paused to look out the kitchen window at her husband, Ryan, chopping firewood. "Yer papa's a good man."

Brianna tossed back her mane of russet curls to look up at her mother with a smile that put a sparkle in her green eyes.

"But yer not moy first born." Mary's voice cracked.

Brianna rolled the dough. "I know, mama, you told me before, lots. I should have a big brother Tom but sailing on the ship was too hard."

"Tom's papa was a good man too. 'e got sick on te ship."

Brianna sprinkled water on the tops of the bread dough in the pans. "What's Ireland like, mama?"

"T'was so green. No snow, not like here. But stony. Hard to grow anyting but taties. An' te plague come an' all te taties went stinky like. We was starvin'." Mary's brogue remained as rich as the day she stepped off the ship in Canada.

“Are there bears in Ireland?” Brianna’s voice held a trace of Irish lilt.

“No bears. Bears is dangerous. You stay away from the woods. It was a bear what got your uncle Seamus.” Mary tussled Brianna’s hair. “You’ve got the hair of your grandma. I’ve just the thing for you. What she give me. A hair comb.”
