

A Name at Last: Identifying the Unknown Child Of the Titanic

BY CALVIN SUN

Of all the frustrations that face a funeral director, few exceed that of having an unnamed decedent. Interring a "John" or a "Jane Doe" means no relatives to notify, no family to counsel and no real name to engrave. After the Titanic disaster, funeral directors faced this problem in preparing bodies that had been returned to Halifax, Nova Scotia, the city from which the recovery operation was based. Of the 209 bodies that were brought there, 150 are interred in three cemeteries and over 40 of them remain unidentified.

One of the most poignant stories of these victims involves a young boy. Known officially as body #4, he carried no identification. The crew of the ship that recovered him, moved by his plight, contributed towards the boy's funeral, marker and inter-

ment at city-owned Fairview Lawn Cemetery. Set among 120 other Titanic markers, that of the Unknown Child of the Titanic (as the boy came to be known) reads:

Erected
to the memory
of an
unknown child
whose remains
were recovered
after the
disaster to
the Titanic
April 15, 1912

For 90 years, the boy lay unidentified at Fairview. Then in 2002, a team of researchers finally gave him a name.

Halifax geologist Alan Ruffman has long been a Titanic student. The

author of "Titanic Remembered: The Unsinkable Ship and Halifax," Ruffman has spent hours at the cemeteries and at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, which houses records of the recovery operation. Over 40 funeral directors from the Canadian Maritime Provinces, led by John Snow of J.A. Snow Funeral Home in Halifax, took part in that operation.

For some time, Ruffman had been investigating the identity of another victim at Fairview, body #281, and was working with the Reverend Canon David Browning of Fonthill, Ontario. Browning, rector of the Anglican Holy Trinity Parish, is clergyman to the family of victim and crewmember Catherine J. Wallis, and was serving as a go-between to protect their then-desire for anonymity. They long believed that Mrs. Wallis



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was body #281, and had come to Ruffman (through Browning) for help.

In researching the Wallis case, Ruffman apparently had reached an impasse. Then, in the late summer of 1999, he connected with Dr. Ryan Parr, at the time co-director of the Paleo-DNA Laboratory at Lakehead University in Ontario. Parr had been identifying, via DNA analysis, familial relationships at a Roman-Byzantine cemetery in Egypt. After seeing a television special about the unidentified Titanic victims, and wanting to become involved, he called the Halifax-based Maritime Museum of the Atlantic and was referred to Ruffman, a research associate there.

Parr described his work in Egypt, suggested that the same approach might work for the Titanic victims and gave Ruffman written information. Ruffman relayed the information to the Wallis family via Browning. In 2000, the family accepted Parr's offer, and asked that he proceed. Ruffman then informally approached Robert Strang M.D., the Nova Scotia Medical Officer of Health, about the process of requesting a disinterment. Strang explained that he needed the family to establish a strong case for why they believed they were related to body #281. He further explained that the exhumation required a legitimate purpose so that it would not be, in his words, "a fishing expedition."

Parr and Ruffman then realized that given their intent to disinter body #281, they might as well ask permission for other unidentified victims as well, to minimize disruption to Fairview. One such victim was body #240 and the other was body #4, the Unknown Child. For this reason, Ruffman and Parr asked the Wallis family to delay their disinterment request. Ruffman then concentrated on finding relatives of these other two victims.

Ruffman and many other Titanic authorities believed that body #4 could be two-year-old Gösta Pålsson, the youngest son of Alma (née Berglund) and Nils Pålsson of Gruvan, Sweden. Alma, Gösta and three

American Cemetery, July 2004

other children (all of whom died) were traveling to Chicago to join Nils, who had gone before them. None of the children ever were officially recovered. However, the coroner's records for body #4 contained the notation "Baby Pålsson (?)," thus causing Ruffman and the others to consider Gösta as a candidate.


Ruffman also believed that body #240 could be 22-year-old Charles J. Shorney. Unlike the case of body #4, no notations regarding identity appear in the records for body #240. However, Ruffman knew from his work that body #240 and Shorney were close in age. He knew also that personal effects found on body #240 were connected to Brighton, England, a town near where Shorney lived, and where he would have bought his ticket.

Ruffman in particular was seeking maternal relatives because of the approach that Parr was proposing, which involved mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). Unlike nuclear DNA


(which is specific to an individual), mtDNA remains the same across multiple generations of a family, being passed from mother to child. The analysis required a miniscule sample of human remains (specifically, only about one gram), so that only a partial rather than a full exhumation would be required.

Ruffman successfully located living maternal relatives of Gösta Pålsson, and also located relatives of Charles Shorney. Because the latter were not maternal relatives, their mtDNA was of no use to Parr. However, the Shorney relatives did give the team permission instead to obtain DNA from the remains of Shorney's father. In early 2001, the families of the three victims formally petitioned Strang for partial disinterment of the graves of bodies #4, #240 and #281. Strang granted their request, thus allowing The Titanic Ancient DNA Project (as it came to be known) to proceed.

Because of the nature of the work,




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the project team wanted publicity about the operation to be delayed until noon on Thursday, May 17, 2001, when it would begin. For this reason, they requested that the news

media change any news until 2:00 p.m. This request pertained as well to a taped interview that one project team member had granted. However, an employee of an Ontario television

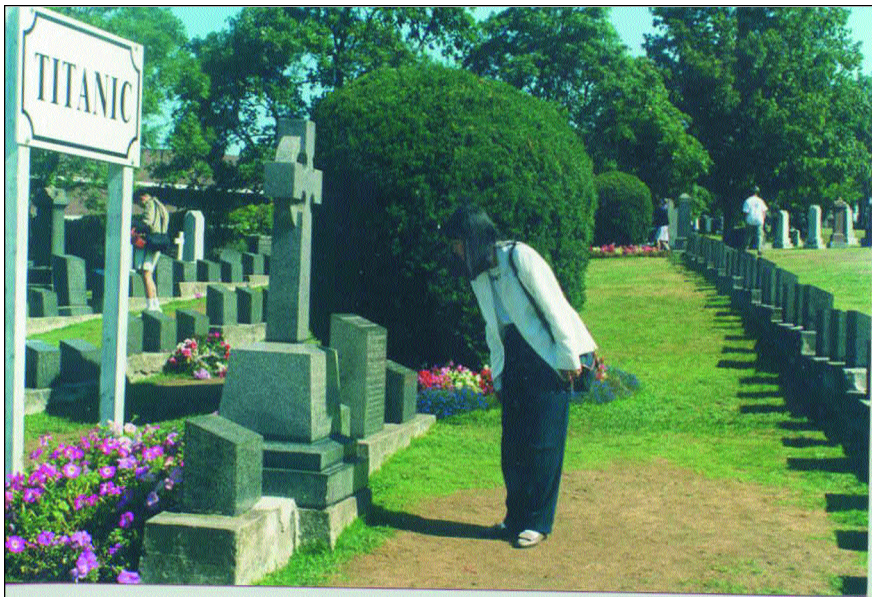
station, who knew about the interview, telephoned a friend who worked at a Halifax station, and leaked details about the project. As a result, that station broadcast news of the project at 11:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 15.

As a result of this action, the team faced worldwide media attention earlier than planned. One Halifax resident, who considered himself the guardian of the Unknown Child, chained himself to the marker in order to stop the project. The matter was resolved after police officials assured the man that the remains would be disturbed as little as possible. The police then lifted the chains off the marker, and the man simply left.

Despite the premature announcement, the disinterments began as scheduled with bodies #240 and #281, located in adjacent lots at the lower end of the Titanic section. Following prayers by Browning, workers began to open the side-by-side graves. As they did so, they encountered large amounts of water, due to the low elevation of these graves and the high level of water table. Though they examined the graves carefully, they found no remains at all. This development shocked the team, causing them to ask themselves, in Parr's words, "What are we going to do?"

Discussing the matter the next morning, the team concluded that the circulation of the large amount of groundwater in the acidic soil had served to completely dissolve the remains. On the other hand, they believed they might have some success with the Unknown Child grave, because it was at a higher point. Though they were concerned about yet a third setback, they decided to continue after a lunchtime comment by Halifax city official Peter Bigelow, "Well, we'll never know unless we go ahead."

As the opening of the Unknown Child grave proceeded, the team began to see evidence of the burial. Removing the final pieces of earth by hand, they saw small pieces of white wood from the now-rotting lid of the small casket, and the remnants of floral stems. Inside the casket, they dis-



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covered what they had sought: remains consisting of three teeth (including two molars) plus a six centimeter fragment of bone. They also saw a badly corroded metal medallion engraved with the words "Our Babe." This medallion was now in two pieces, and one letter was completely dissolved. Their third attempt had succeeded.

Returning to his laboratory, Parr began analyzing the bone, a process that occurred between December 2001 and February 2002. However, he soon encountered problems. Metal from the "Our Babe" medallion had seeped into the bone, contaminating it. As Ruffman remarked, the medallion was a "two-edged sword." It did complicate the mtDNA analysis, but at the same time preserved the bone. Nonetheless, Parr still was able to analyze the mtDNA and conclude that it was a non-match with that of a maternal Pålsson relative. On May 3, 2002, Parr and Ruffman released the disappointing news that the Unknown Child was not Gösta Pålsson.

While the bone mtDNA excluded the Pålsson boy, its contamination made it impractical for further analysis. Parr fortunately discovered an alternative mtDNA source. In talking



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Unknown Child's grave at Fairview Garden Cemetery

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with dental experts, to whom he had sent the teeth, he learned that one molar contained dentin, a material rich in mtDNA. He learned also that the shape and condition of the teeth indicated a boy younger than about a year old.

While Parr continued his work now with the mtDNA from the dentin, Ruffman set out to locate living maternal relatives of five other boys that he thought could be the Unknown Child. These five boys were:

- Gilbert Danbom (age five months, from Sweden)
- Alfred Peacock (age seven months, from England)
- Eino Viljam Panula (age thirteen months, from Finland)
- Sidney Goodwin (age 19 months, from England)
- Eugene Rice (age 2 years, from Ireland)

After much effort on his own and from professional genealogists, Ruffman managed to locate maternal relatives for all five boys. All of these relatives agreed to assist, by providing six drops of blood. In fact, one of them, a first cousin of the Panula boy, was a man who was 100 years old.

The mtDNA testing resulted in a non-match for relatives of three of the boys. The other two — the Goodwin and Panula boys — did have relatives whose mtDNA matched. However, the Goodwin boy was too old to have the shape and condition of the teeth that were recovered. Based on this evidence, Parr and Ruffman announced on Nov. 6, 2002, their conclusion that the Unknown Child was Eino Viljam Panula.

What did the participants think about their work? Ruffman takes pride in helping reunite the Berglund family,

from whom Alma Pålsson, the mother of Gösta, was descended. “There are two branches of the family,” he explained. “One was in the west [of Sweden] and the other was in the south.” But for the project, he believes, neither branch might ever have discovered the other.

Parr’s strongest impression was the huge personal repercussions of the Titanic. He mentioned Catherine J. Wallis, whose descendants provided the impetus for The Titanic Ancient DNA Project, and who still believe that she was body #281. “The husband [of Mrs. Wallis] had died,” he said. “Now the wife died also, and their children were orphaned. I had to satisfy my desire to help.”

Browning’s greatest concern was for the dignity of the operation. He spoke almost mischievously about the “cat and mouse” games he played with the media in that regard. On several critical occasions, he would casually slide in front of a camera to block its view. He also made a point of wearing his clerical collar. He agrees with Parr that even after 90 years, the personal tragedy of Titanic continues for victim relatives. Telling the Wallis relatives about empty grave #281, he said, was “heartbreaking.” But he realized that as a professional, he had to do it.

Perhaps the most succinct comment came from funeral director Don MacKay of the J.A. Snow Funeral Home. Said MacKay, “Mr. Snow would have been pleased.”

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Calvin Sun is a consultant and speaker who has studied the Titanic and has incorporated stories about it into his professional presentations, including two for NFDA. He visited the Halifax Titanic graves in 1998 and interviewed cemetery staff and others connected with them. His article on the subject appeared in the October 1999 issue of American Funeral Director. He has interviewed and corresponded with relatives of six Titanic victims and survivors. He can be reached at csun@calvinsun.com, www.calvinsun.com

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