

The Province

Reliving the Titanic tragedy; Victoria exhibit puts a human face on night to remember. Artifacts from the doomed ship are on display at the Royal B.C. Museum; [Final Edition]

*Laurie Carter. **The Province**. Vancouver, B.C.: Apr 10, 2007. pg. A.39.Fr*

Atlantic Ocean The Associated Pressril 15, 1912, 1:20 a.m.

"That's all for this boat," yells the steward in charge of loading lifeboat 11.

Nellie Becker is horrified. "Please let me in this boat," she pleads. "Those are my children." The distraught mother points to baby Richard and four-year-old Marion who have already been passed through the promenade deck window and are now in the arms of total strangers.

The steward relents and Nellie scrambles aboard, stumbling in the crush of passengers and crew. Unlike so many of the boats that cast off earlier, this craft is overloaded. Titanic is listing so heavily it scrapes along her side as it inches toward the sea.

Nellie looks up and realizes her oldest daughter, 12-year-old Ruth, is still standing on deck. "Ruth," she screams. "Get another boat!"

I pieced together this scene after a preview of the Royal B.C. Museum's new show, Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition -- an experience that didn't end when I walked out the exit.

Within days I'd reread Walter Lord's *A Night to Remember*, found a book on Canadian connections to the disaster and browsed my way through encyclopedia-Titanica.com and a half-dozen other websites.

My reaction was exactly what museum staff intended with the many touches they've added to the touring show, making it completely different from the Titanic exhibits you may have seen in other cities.

They've created demonstration stations with trained interpreters, like the wireless area where you can feel the pressure of the key as you tap out your own SOS signal.

Junior docents, aged 11 to 14, play Edwardian games illustrating what it was like for children aboard the ship. And roaming characters -- Captain Smith, cabin stewardess Violet Jessop, Second Officer Lightoller and the irrepressible Molly Brown -- tell their stories and answer questions about the tragic voyage.

But the most compelling touch is purely personal.

I met second-class passenger Nellie Becker when I was handed a boarding pass bearing her name. A missionary's wife, she was travelling with three children from India to America to seek medical attention for her year-old son, Richard.

From then on, through every stage of the exhibit, I wondered about Nellie -- what it was like for her.

In the first gallery, while billboard photos chronicled construction of the largest moving object yet created by men, with the double bottom and watertight compartments that had the popular press calling her "practically unsinkable," I was more interested in the ship's plan where I searched for her cabin,

F-4 (just one deck above the waterline).

The sheer enormity of the first artifact I saw, a metre-long engine room wrench, black and textured like petrified wood after lying 80 years in the perpetual darkness of the deep Atlantic, spoke volumes about the four-storey tall engines aboard Titanic.

But I was more drawn to the period steamer trunks, one the size of a bedroom armoire, that museum staff have acquired to give scale to stories such as the one of first-class passenger, Charlotte Cardeza, who boarded with 14 trunks, numerous suitcases and three packing crates.

Nellie's luggage would have been like the more modest trunks on display.

Much of the exhibition focuses on the happy part of Titanic's single voyage, four days of deluxe treatment for all her passengers. While class distinction has always been a big part of the legend, the galleries depicting life on board turn up some surprising facts. The recreated first-class cabin, Verandah Cafe and artifacts like a gold-rimmed Spode dinner plate, queen-sized olive pits and champagne bottles (still corked and containing liquid) fit my expectations.

However, third-class accommodations were a far cry from the popular myth.

For passengers making a one-way crossing in search of a better life: the cabins were clean and bright; the public rooms must have seemed luxurious; and it's unlikely that many had ever eaten so well with plentiful food served on china emblazoned with the White Star pennant and fresh fruit at every meal.

Nellie was likely equally impressed with the lavish surroundings in second class, which were said to rival first class on other vessels. The Becker's cabin would have been finished in white enamel with mahogany furniture, curtains to screen the bunks and linoleum tile (the latest thing) on the floor.

There was no private bath -- even most passengers in first lacked this luxury -- but she did have a sink. Among the artifacts from second-class are a soap dish and blue and white china from the oak-pannelled dining saloon.

The best-known iceberg in history ripped through the fantasy at 11:40 on the night of April 14. Just two hours and 40 minutes later, the great ship was gone.

In a gallery chilled by a wall of real ice and the sight of Titanic's engine room telegraph, I try on a replica life jacket, bulky and hard to tie with coarse canvass straps. I'm moved

by the stories of courage and cowardice, quick thinking and dull error, bad planning, bad communications and bad luck.

I think of Nellie and all the other mothers and wives, sisters and lovers -- of all the painful partings -- the dark, cold hours of grief and uncertainty adrift in open boats -- the tainted relief of final rescue.

The count was never perfect, but 1,316 passengers, 885 crew and eight band members definitely sailed on Titanic. The rescuing vessel Carpathia picked up just 705 survivors.

Through the Seabed gallery, the details of discovery, recovery and conservation are punctuated by ghostly images of the broken ship lying nearly four kilometres beneath the surface of the Atlantic.

In the background, the ultimate question hovers. I find what I'm looking for among the names on the Memorial wall -- Nellie, Marion, Richard and Ruth Becker -- saved.

IF YOU GO

- The National Geographic film *Titanica* is playing at the Imax theatre adjacent to the exhibit (www.imaxvictoria.com). It's a heart-pumping exploration of the wreck with seabed footage of many of the artifacts on display.

- Many Victoria businesses are getting onboard with the Titanic theme: The Empress Hotel is offering a special dinner in the Empress Room based on the last meal served in the first-class dining saloon and paired with select B.C. wines; Edwardian cocktails complement the offerings at the Grand Pacific; **Spinnakers** Gastro Brewpub is featuring Unsinkable Molly Brown Ale and Titanic Stout; and the Irish Times Pub's Titanic 1912 menu spotlights hearty fare from third class.

- The museum has also uncovered several B.C. connections. One of the ship's most famous passengers, the Countess of Rothes, was travelling to the Okanagan. Mabel Fortune, who lost her father and brother, lived much of her life in Victoria and is buried there. Hilda Slater survived to marry and live on Denman Island. Charles Hayes planned a great port at Prince Rupert as the western terminus of a second transcontinental railway. The project languished after he went down with the ship. Thomas McCaffrey, a Vancouver banker, and Edward Colley, for whom Mount Colley is named, also died.

- Titanic tickets at the museum (www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca) that include timed entry to the museum and the IMAX film are \$32.50 for adults, with reduced rates to seniors and students.