

Celebrating the "St Roch"

by G.T. Wright, RCMP Staff Historian

The "Quarterly" staff would like to take this opportunity to welcome the author who joined the Historical Section, Public Affairs Directorate, on December 17, 1992. We are looking forward to working with him in the years to come. — Ed.

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In the spring of 1940, Commissioner S.T. Wood summoned Sgt. Henry Larsen, Captain of the RCMP supply vessel "St Roch" and instructed him to journey through the Northwest Passage — from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Halifax, Nova Scotia — to demonstrate Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic archipelago. It was a daunting challenge, but Larsen and his crew were equal to the task.

Since the 16th century, explorers and adventurers had probed the icy waters of the Northern archipelago for a route to the East. Many voyages had ended in death and disaster. In spite of the dangers, explorers had continued to search for the elusive northern passage, but it was not until Roald Amundsen completed the entire voyage from the Atlantic to the Pacific, between 1903 and 1906, that the Northwest Passage was finally conquered.

But no one had traversed the route from the opposite direction — from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic. On June 23, 1940, Larsen and his small crew left Vancouver, on the "St

Roch" bound for Halifax. Like many of the explorers before them, they spent the better part of two years firmly imbedded in Arctic ice before continuing their journey. Finally, after 28 months, they arrived at Halifax on October 11, 1942.

On two occasions during the course of her northern odyssey, the "St Roch" had put into harbour at Cambridge Bay, Northwest Territories. With the active cooperation of the RCMP, local residents decided that their community was the appropriate location to honour the memory of the "St Roch". On August 21, 1992, The Right Honourable Ramon J. Hnatyshyn, Governor General of Canada, and Mrs. Henry Larsen unveiled a plaque at Cambridge Bay, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the historic voyage. Two members of the "St Roch" crew, Pat Hunt and Eugene Hadley, members of Cambridge Bay Detachment, and the local Inuit community attended the ceremony. Commissioner N.D. Inkster, who was also present at the ceremony, paid tribute to the intrepid little ship. In the Commissioner's words, it was "a significant anniversary in the history of the Arctic, the RCMP and indeed all of Canada."

On October 11, 1992, further celebrations co-hosted by the RCMP were held at three different locations. In Vancouver, the principal focus of festivities, over 700 visitors attended a commemorative ceremony at the