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Scientists say hockey stick is at least 172 years old

Dating Mount Allison researchers able to give N.S. man approximate age of wooden artifact

ADAM HURAS
TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Mount Allison University scientists have confirmed that a piece of Cape Breton sugar maple is in fact the oldest known hockey stick in existence.

Specialists at the Sackville university working in Atlantic Canada's only dendrochronology lab believe the stick was carved between 1835 and 1838 – at least 172 years ago.

The findings come more than a year after the stick's current owner turned to the school to fix a tree age to what is now a national treasure.

"We were able to establish a very firm conclusion," said specialist Colin Laroque, who uses tree rings to date objects. "For, at times, not thinking we would be able to get anything, this is a great find."

The stick was thrust into the national spotlight when Nova Scotian Mark Presley, the owner of the stick, appeared in Campbellton for Hockey Day in Canada in February 2009.

Presley purchased the stick from a barbershop in North Sydney, N.S., last year when the business shut down. The stick had adorned the shop's wall for more than three decades, without anyone knowing its possible significance.

Presley then turned to Mount Allison to determine the stick's place in hockey history, since he believed he owned hockey's Holy Grail.

"When we were first contacted by the owner and he asked 'what are my chances?' we said 'this is a needle in a haystack.'"

But Presley came armed with a rough historical background of the stick, knowing the area where it may have been cut near North Sydney.

Laroque could also identify more than 40 tree rings without cutting into the stick, making a match with similar-aged trees a possibility.

"In a certain sense this is like lightning striking twice – first with Mark being able to find all of this genealogical information and then for us to be able to get that many rings off the stick," Laroque said.

"We had a bunch of samples that gave us a pretty clear pattern, but we didn't have very many samples that went back



PHOTOS COURTESY MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY

Amanda Young, a Mount Allison researcher, examines a hockey stick that has been determined to have been made from Cape Breton sugar maple wood in the 1830s.

far enough.

"We went back to the forest and got some more samples and then pushed our chronology back to the late 1770s era, giving us a more accurate date."

Other antique hockey sticks have sold at auction for millions of dollars.

A stick believed to have been carved between 1852 and 1856 was sold in 2006 for \$2.2 million.

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COLIN LAROQUE

Last year, a Quebec resident grabbed national headlines after offering for sale on eBay – for US\$1 million – a vintage stick he claimed could be hundreds of years old.

Presley did not return calls or emails from the Telegraph-Journal.

He has previously said he will continue to gather historical information on the stick regardless of the university's conclusion, also suggesting a book on its story.

"He was almost tearing up," Laroque said, when he contacted Presley with the news. "For him, this is a validation of all of his amateur historian work."

"If you were to give us a hundred sticks like this, we may be able to do something with four or five of them."

Laroque said the national attention his lab has received has resulted in several other requests to study other old sticks Canadians have lying around.

"We have had several calls," he said. "But we have had to say we can't do anything with a bunch of them because there's not enough tree rings to verify."

Laroque said the finding is bittersweet since it's unlikely that the stick will ever be dated to an exact year unless it is cut to reveal its rings.

"Everyone thinks this should be a big eureka moment where you are jumping up and down," Laroque said. "In our game we're never satisfied."

"But in this case, we have done everything we possibly can."