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INDEPENDENT SINCE 1824

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA



Mark Presley holds what is believed to be the oldest hockey stick in existence, about 170 years old, at his Berwick home on Friday. Presley bought the stick from a North Sydney barber who was retiring.

(Photos by CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

Scoring a stick for the ages

Berwick man's piece of hockey history carved from 170-year-old maple, wood-dating expert confirms

Staff reporter **KELLY SHIERS** talks to Mark Presley, a Berwick man who is the proud owner of what is believed to be the oldest hockey stick in existence.

MARK PRESLEY just scored a big win. It took time, effort and dedication.

And, as one would expect when you're talking about anything related to Canada's beloved game of hockey, there were plenty of assists along the way.

But in a game of ultimate one-upmanship, the Berwick man now claims the title: Owner of the world's oldest hockey stick.

His historic piece of carved sugar maple that — almost unbelievably — dates back some 170 years, is older than hockey itself.

"The stick itself saw the game become hockey," says Presley, with a passion preserved for die-hard fans.

"It was witness to the game's evolution, and to me, that's the exciting thing."

Skeptical?

Well, he has the science to back it up.



The blade bears the initials of William Moffat, thought to be the original owner.

But we'll get to that a bit later.

Presley's story with this piece of hockey history began a decade ago. Think field-hockey stick, rather than the sleek, tape-wrapped version of today's all-stars and you'll get some idea of what the 43-year-old saw back then when he sat down in a North Sydney

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barbershop and noticed it hanging on a wall. It piqued his curiosity. From time-to-time, he'd pop into the shop to see if it was still there. Then, a couple of years ago, Presley heard the barber was about to retire and asked if he could buy it.

Presley won't say what he paid for it. Suffice to say he brought it home, along with the story the barber told: that he had gotten it maybe 25 years earlier from Charlie Moffatt, a man in his 90s who was living in a nursing home.

Presley tracked Moffatt down and learned the stick had been passed down from generation to generation in the prominent Loyalist family. Charlie's father, Warren, and grandfather, Thomas, had used the stick as youngsters on Pottle Lake, near the family's home.

With more clues in hand, Presley began doing his own research into the family. While Charlie's own father's initials — WM — matched those etched into the blade, Presley also learned the initials matched Thomas's older brother, W.M. (Dilly) Moffat, who was born in 1829.

Backed by a "marvellous" oral history and archival records, Presley said he figured the stick was likely Dilly's. And based on its size — about waist-high — he figured it was likely made for him as a child. He reasoned the stick likely dated to about 1839 or 1840.

Not everyone was convinced.

"A lot of people were rather cynical to my claims of the potential age of the stick because there's nothing like it," he said, adding even he wondered if the stick could really be that old.

And that's what took him to tree scientist Colin Laroque for expert help.

Laroque, an expert in dating ancient wood, said he scanned images of the 42 years' worth of growth rings visible on the butt-end of the stick. And last summer, a research team scoured the Pottle Lake area to find living sugar maples old enough to compare the pattern of their growth rings with the rings on the stick.

"It was sort of a CSI detective game," Laroque recalled.

Laroque said he wasn't sure researchers would even find trees old enough to do the research, but they found four and were able to prove the stick was made from wood felled in the same area. Further analyses concluded the stick was made from a tree cut down between 1835 and 1838.

Laroque also turned to his colleagues at Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B., for their help to analyze paint on the stick. According to those tests, there were five different paints on the stick, the earliest consistent with that used in the mid-1800s.



Mark Presley admires his 170-year-old maple hockey stick at his Berwick home on Friday. The stick, which has Cape Breton origins, is believed to be the oldest in existence.

(CHRISTIAN LAFORCE / Staff)

"What's left is the one-in-a-million chance that someone harvested the wood, then left it, carved it later and found really old paints to make it match what it would have looked like if it was carved in 1838," said Laroque, whose findings were unveiled this month at the annual meeting of the Society for International Hockey Research in Manitoba.

"We don't believe that's occurred."

And neither does Presley.

"To have the story and the science to back up the claims of age is really the magnificent part of it," he said. "You take both these pieces — the science and the provenance — and it adds up to a national treasure. There's really no doubt about it because of the way we feel about hockey in this country."

Presley said he feels a "certain level of

responsibility" given the cultural and historical implications of the stick. He said he's in no hurry to decide what to do with it next, adding that any decision about loaning or selling the stick "would require thoughtful consideration."

But he said he thinks there is more to learn from the stick.

"I really think that door's just opened now," Presley said.

"What does it mean? What did that game look like (that was played in those early days) and why did it become hockey? It was right there and that's the thing. . . . I think people are beginning to understand that the best way we'll put the story (of hockey) together is if we share information."

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