

# Telling the Immigrant Story



*The last "immigration shed" in Canada, Halifax's Pier 21 is now an interactive facility honouring the immigrant experience*

BY ALLAN LYNCH



A snowy landscape, made grey and grim by rain, greeted John Cree, a 16-year-old Irish lad, when he arrived alone and all but destitute in Canada in November 1929. With only \$2 to his name, he was shuffled from the boat into Pier 21, Halifax's new immigration facility. It was here, on a rough wooden bench in a cold shed, that the homesick young immigrant spent his first night in Canada.

In the 1920s, Canada needed immigrants to help farm the land. Advertisements for farm workers were placed in Britain. Cree, who'd worked on a small farm on the outskirts of Belfast for six months, came across one of these and, having heard of the "rich life in Canada," decided to sign on. In his excitement, he didn't take much notice of the fact that he was making a commitment to do farm labour for three years. Had he known how unpleasant his life would be as a farm hand, he might not have pursued the opportunity. The food was bad, the isolation was

unbearable, and his employers cheated him on wages. Six months of farm work was enough for Cree, but not meeting his three-year commitment meant risking deportation. At this point he felt it was a risk worth taking.

Cree made his escape by riding the rails to Montreal – he knew he had two half-brothers in or near the city, although he had no address for them and no idea how to find them. Whipped by wind, rain and stinging smoke from the engine, he spent days riding on the roofs of boxcars. In spite of the economic hardship of the time, strangers offered him food and places to sleep. One family gave him a new pair of shoes, and a CN engineer actually slowed the train down so he could jump aboard.

Unable to find his brothers in Montreal, Cree decided to set off on foot for New York, where he had an aunt. Not far from Montreal, however, he met a kindly farmer and decided to stay with him for a while, working for room and board. The farmer let

A crowd gathers at Pier 21 to greet the HMCS *Skeena* on its arrival from war-torn Britain in 1941.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PIER 21, NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA AND HALIFAX PORT AUTHORITY