

# Search continues for Grand Falls locomotive

By Madeleine Leclerc

Stubbornness and a will to see a project through to its end are motivating Eric Ouellette's continuing efforts to locate a locomotive engine that plunged into the St. John River more than a century ago.

Ouellette, an engineer by trade, has spent the past few years of his free time trying to find the remains of Canadian Pacific Railway steam locomotive No. 508. The locomotive and the freight cars it was pulling ended up in the river when the bridge underneath it collapsed in

June of 1900. Sonar equipment has recorded images that confirm a large shape lying on the bottom of the river. The images show the outline of an object approximately 22 feet long and six feet high. Located between the piers of the collapsed bridge, Ouellette said the object didn't have any distinguishing features that would identify it as the locomotive, and that the only way to find out for sure was to send a dive team down.

Ouellette, who is hoping to take a diving course, figures he should be the one to make the

final dive. Previous dive attempts produced remnants of what are likely part of the locomotive's braking system.

In his continuing quest, Ouellette has received the support of local businesspeople as well as divers Luc Pelletier of Baker Lake and Danny Trites of Moncton, who recently moved to the Perth-Andover area. Both are certified divers and instructors whose interest in the project equals Ouellette's.

Armed with approvals from the Departments of the Environment, Natural Resources,

Fisheries and Oceans as well as NB Power, Ouellette's plans to continue looking for the locomotive were set in motion.

"Exploration of the sand mound under which we hope the locomotive engine is located can proceed until September," Ouellette told *The Victoria Star*. "Danny is just as into the search as I am," he added. "We talked about the project extensively. He has all the gadgets we need to make the search much easier and really exciting, such as a handheld magnetometer, underwater picture and video capabilities and, best of all, the gear needed to excavate the riverbed."

"He's made a few preliminary dives to get familiar with the site. We've also built a barge to use when we go out on the river. All of the materials needed to build the platform were donated by local businesses," Ouellette added. "Towed by boat to the wreck site, it is then anchored to one of the piers during the work. It also serves as a diving pad and a place to lay all the equipment we use for digging. All of this can only happen when the dam is closed."

The group's first dive of the year occurred in early June. "Danny was very eager to get to the bottom of the river and find out about visibility, water flow, riverbed materials and more. We found some interesting pieces at the wreck site but I don't think they are from the accident. He saw the sand mound and says it is very big!"

"Dan also took a few pictures of some interesting things he saw

at the bottom. We don't know what they are yet but this was the first time I had seen the bottom since I started the search back in 2003," stated Ouellette.

In addition to the search, plans to retrieve the locomotive engine if it is found are also in the works. In talking about the project recently with Desman Tranquilla, an employee with Atcon Construction currently working on the Brunway Highway construction project in the area, Ouellette was told that he would also be interested in volunteering his time to help build a system to retrieve the engine from the riverbed.

Due to a hectic work schedule, Ouellette has not been able to devote more time to the project other than a few weekends ago when he, Trites and Pelletier tried out homemade

digging equipment. "Visibility again was zero on Aug. 5 because of heavy rains the night before," Ouellette said.

"We had a diver tank taped to the vacuum for an air supply. Danny says it seems to work very well. Next time we go out, we will be better equipped with an air compressor on the barge in order to be able to dig for a longer period and a brand new vacuum we plan on building ourselves."

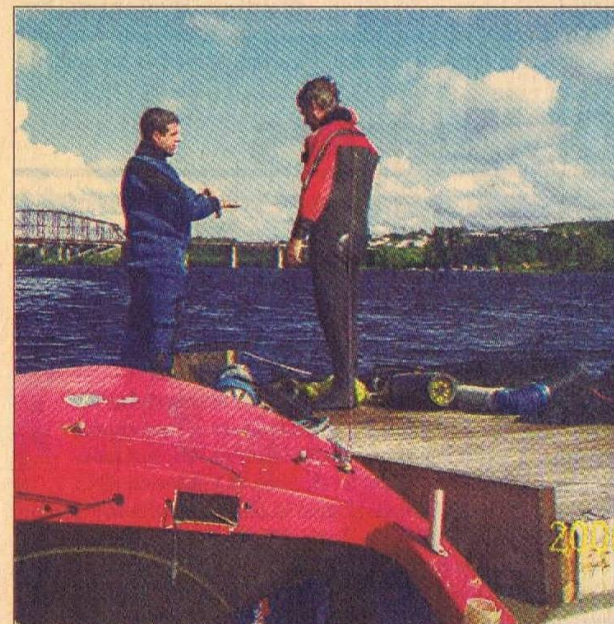
"The barge worked really well for the divers and was very stable for three adults and all the scuba gear," he added.

Keep up to date on Ouellette's search for the locomotive online by clicking on the appropriate links at [www.grandfalls.com](http://www.grandfalls.com) (see History of Grand Falls) or [www.gemtec.nb.ca](http://www.gemtec.nb.ca) (see CPR steam locomotive No. 508).



### Search team

Left to right: Luc Pelletier, Eric Ouellette, Marc Laforge and Danny Trites gathered at the Grand Falls Marina recently to test digging equipment at the site of the 1900 train derailment. (Madeleine Leclerc photo)



### Discussing plans

Divers Danny Trites, left, and Luc Pelletier discuss their plans while standing on a barge anchored over the sand mound where searchers are hoping a locomotive engine rests after plunging to the riverbed in June 1900. (Contributed photo)