

Another Titanic expedition possible in 2010

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Millvina Dean, 82, the youngest survivor of the Titanic which sank in 1912, peers through a porthole from the sunken liner which features as part of an exhibition of artifacts entitled "The Wreck of the Titanic" in London in this September 29, 1994 file photo.[Agencies]

The company that has exclusive rights to salvage the Titanic wants to make another expedition to the world's most famous shipwreck in 2010.

RMS Titanic Inc.'s expedition would be the first by the salvor since 2004, though two other expeditions have been to the site since then, including one by "Titanic" director James Cameron. The company went before a judge on Monday to seek a salvage award for its past expeditions, and to inform the court of its plans.

"Obviously we have an interest in going back to shipwreck for a number of reasons but we want to do it with the blessing of the court," Christopher Davino, president and CEO of RMS Titanic, told The Associated Press after the first of four days of hearings in federal court.

"It's very early in our thinking regarding a strategy for future expeditions," he said, declining to discuss a future expedition before informing the judge.

In court filings, the company has said it is making plans to return to the wreck site next year.

U.S. District Judge Rebecca Beach Smith, a maritime jurist who considers the wreck an "international treasure," is presiding over the hearings. They are not only intended to determine a salvage award, but to establish legal guarantees that thousands of Titanic artifacts remain intact as a collection and forever accessible to the public. Some pieces have ended up in London auction houses.

The 5,900 pieces of china, ship fittings and personal belongings are valued at more than \$110 million and are displayed around the world by Premier Exhibitions Inc., an Atlanta company. RMS Titanic is a subsidiary of Premier.

The first two witnesses Monday testified about management changes at Premier and the perils and costs associated with salvage expeditions to the Titanic. Smith has previously expressed concerns about Premier's management. The company underwent a board change in 2009 and received a \$12 million cash infusion from investors. Davino took charge five months ago.

Jack H. Jacobs, one of the new directors, said Premier had been "an extremely poorly run company," but has turned around. He said the mismanagement did not extend to the

conservancy of the Titanic artifacts.

Asked by RMS Titanic attorney Robert W. McFarland if Premier was committed to properly maintaining the artifacts, Jacobs replied: "Yes, absolutely committed. Unequivocally committed."

Deep-dive explorer Paul-Henry Nargeolet, who has led five expeditions to the Titanic wreck, testified about the extraordinary expense and risks of deep-sea exploration. They include 150-foot-high icebergs that can threaten ships and the harrowing, claustrophobic voyages 12,000-feet down to the wreck through 33-degree Atlantic waters.

The Titanic sank on its maiden voyage in international waters on April 15, 1912, and has been subject to competing legal claims since an international team led by oceanographer Robert Ballard found it in 1985. Since then, RMS Titanic has retrieved artifacts during six dives.

Courts have declared RMS Titanic salvor-in-possession — meaning it has exclusive rights to salvage the Titanic — but have explicitly stated it does not own the 5,900 artifacts or the wreck itself.

At the hearings this week in Norfolk, lawyers for RMS Titanic will seek title to the artifacts and a monetary award for its salvage costs.

Smith, the judge, has drawn upon the government to help craft covenants to preserve the artifacts as a collection, available to the public. She is mindful of the Titanic's place in history and the 1,522 people who died when it went down after it struck ice nearly a century ago, based on her previous statements from the bench.

If the court agrees to RMS Titanic's request, the company could sell the entire collection to a museum with court approval. The company has said it has no plans to do so.

The judge will also consider a competing claim.

Douglas Faulkner Woolley, a British citizen, challenges RMS Titanic's legal claim to the wreck site and plans his own salvage operation.

Lawyers for RMS Titanic declined to discuss the competing challenge.

International protections have been sought for the Titanic almost since the wreck was discovered.

"Source: China Daily/Agencies"