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## FROM SOUP TO NUTS



Carole Brown Artale works as a volunteer for OC Transpo's lost and found depot at the Heartwood House, which takes in 22,000 items in an average year.

# Treasures lost — and found

As Ottawans find coins tucked away long ago in spring coats, thousands of items are waiting to be reclaimed from the city's buses, train station and airport. Elaine O'Connor explains.

It's a ritual as old as spring cleaning: spring finding. Spring marks the seasonal liberation of errant gloves, tennis shoes, dog collars and various other detritus lost for months under drifts of snow. All across the city, money is being discovered in the pockets of light coats, keys are sliding out from under car mats: This is the season when Ottawa unearths its treasures and lost things come home — tens of thousands of them.

That's the estimated number of articles lost on the city's buses and trains, in airports, hotels, humane societies and on campuses every year. OC Transpo's lost and found, for example, takes in 22,500 items in an average year.

"We get everything from soup to nuts in here," says OC Transpo lost and found employee Mike Ward. "We even get baby carriages, without babies fortunately — so far anyway."

Between 2001 and 2002, the lost and found's thousands of items included \$5,726 in cash, 4,400 bus passes, 2,100 umbrellas, 1,100 items of clothing, 435 books, 430 wallets, 413 backpacks, 300 pairs of shoes, 50 musical instruments, 83 CD players and other electronics, and nine

laptops and personal digital assistants.

"It's unbelievable," says Moe Moloughney, organizer of the Heartwood House volunteers, who run the lost and found. "It just keeps coming and coming."

Every day they get 250 frantic calls from people searching for lost goods and another 200 found items are dropped off at the Chapel Street depot — everything from bicycles to trumpets. (On Montreal's transit system, workers have found a human skull, a massage table, a wheelchair and a live cat.)

The majority of the items, Ms. Moloughney says, go unclaimed. "A lot of it is people not realizing we're here or thinking that someone might have stolen the item," she says. "But there are so many honest people. The vast majority of items left on the bus are turned in to us."

The ones that aren't claimed are sold in a twice-yearly sale (the next is April 26) for as little as \$5. But volunteers say they aren't in it for bargains; they enjoy helping lost treasures find their owners.

"My most vivid memory is a young woman in her late teens who left very expensive ballet shoes on the bus and she was certain they were gone," Ms.

Moloughney recalls. "When she came to pick them up she broke down crying, she was so happy to have them back."

Among the cell phones, sunglasses, keys and children's toys — up to 500 items at any one time that appear in the Ottawa

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Mike Ward, employee OC Transpo lost and found

Airport's lost and found — a number of single shoes are turned in to the terminal depot, leaving lost and found staff wondering where travellers are headed with one bare foot.

At the Château Laurier, housekeeping staff wonder how people can forget their teeth — dentures — while sex toys top the "you-don't-want-to-know" list of items guests leave behind.

At Carleton University, lost and found manager Christa Pi-

geon says she guards 200 items and gets 50 new ones every week — mostly gloves, hats and wallets (usually emptied of cash), but once a baby stroller (empty), a suitcase, a high-tech camera and a scooter.

That's nothing compared with the University of Alberta's menagerie of rabbits and chickens, a porcupine and snake, and its cache of oddities including a tuba, sofa and gravestone.

VIA Rail's Ottawa terminal gets "everything from A to Z," says the in-charge of customer service man, Roger Bourque. "You want one glove, come here."

If an item isn't snatched up by a passenger, it's kept for 90 days. After that, the employee who found it gets first dibs and the rest goes to charity. Mr. Bourque says would-be poachers claiming to have lost expensive items are usually thwarted by quizzes and identification checks used to weed out fakers.

The Ottawa terminal gets 40 items a month, on average 500 a year — a fraction of the 5,000 objects left behind at Paris's main train station or the 4,000 items left in Manhattan's Grand Central Terminal — but its objects are no less bizarre.

"We've had the odd walker left behind," Mr. Bourque says. "It sat here and sat here. Somebody tracked it down four months later. I found that a bit weird. What, he hasn't walked in four months?"

Ottawans are quicker on the

draw when it comes to searching for lost pets. Each year, residents place more than 120 lost-item and 260 lost-pet advertisements in the Citizen, and the paper runs 250 free found-item and 230 found-pet classifieds.

The Ottawa Humane Society's lost and found provided a temporary home to more than 7,000 of these lost pets last year — 3,114 dogs and 3,986 cats were brought in, says executive director Bruce Roney, noting that while 61 per cent of dogs were reunited with owners, just seven per cent of cats were claimed.

"I'm sorry to say it, but I think for some people cats are seen as disposable animals," he says.

The key to bringing Fluffy or Rover home safely is tagging them appropriately, Mr. Roney says, adding that all healthy and even-tempered unclaimed animals are offered for adoption.

While lost pets are seen by most owners as priceless and irreplaceable, perhaps the most expensive item ever lost in Ottawa was the winning Keno lottery ticket worth \$250,000 left in a dollar store's photocopying machine in July 2001.

Much to the relief of retired public servant Robert Moroni, it was later returned.

OC Transpo's lost and found is at 563-4011; the Ottawa Airport lost and found is at 248-2054; The Ottawa Humane Society lost and found is at 725-3166 ext. 223; the VIA Rail Ottawa depot is at 224-5281.