

Early Vancouver

Volume One

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2011 Edition (Originally Published 1932)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1931-1932.

*A Collection of Historical Data, Maps, and Plans Made with the Assistance of
Pioneers of Vancouver Between March and December 1931.*

About the 2011 Edition

The 2011 edition is a transcription of the original work collected and published by Major Matthews. Handwritten marginalia and corrections Matthews made to his text over the years have been incorporated and some typographical errors have been corrected, but no other editorial work has been undertaken. The edition and its online presentation was produced by the City of Vancouver Archives to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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1923 or 1924, there was still a certain amount of croaking, in the springtime, in the low garden of Major J.S. Matthews at the corner of Whyte Avenue and Arbutus Street.

The frogs were the last survivors of a great band which in earlier days made the low ground, the muskeg, at the back of Greer's Beach, their habitat. Even as late as 1920—after the sand had been pumped in seven years—there was a goodly chorus each summer evening; most of the noise came from the south side of the Kitsilano Street car tracks, which had not been filled in; a low area ran from east of Maple Street to Yew Street with Cornwall Street as its southern boundary. The reason for this was as follows.

In 1913, there was considerable dredging to deepen the channel of False Creek; it was necessary to secure some place to put the dredged out sand. The low land adjacent to the beach and behind it offered a suitable spot; the sand would be taken from where it was an obstruction to navigation, and placed where it would raise the level of residential lots to that of the street car tracks—in places, as much as thirteen feet.

The property owners in this low section were offered the opportunity to have this low land filled in with sand, pumped from False Creek by the Pacific Dredging Company, who had the contract. At that time there was, north of the track and on the low land, three houses only, those of Major Matthews, Dr. Humber and Alderman Williamson. The City of Vancouver offered to elevate these three houses free of cost; the Pacific Dredging Company wanted payment, \$100 per lot, from the property owners for the filling in. Major Matthews, at least, paid the charge, and the other two probably did, and in due time the land was filled in, that of Major Matthews, at 1343 Maple Street, being filled in thirteen feet. The sand was pumped in from the dredge anchored in False Creek by means of huge pipes, carried on small scow floats to the shore, and then run over the land, continuous moving from place to place being necessary for the outlet. There was a tremendous flow of water through the mouth of the pipes, and many fish came through with sand and water, and gave the school youngsters much amusement and wet feet. The pumping continued for about three months.

The property owners on the south side of the street car track—between that and Cornwall Street—assumed a haughty demeanor. The owners of the only two houses on that side of the track—they stood on Laburnum Street, east side—took the view that if the dredging company wanted to pump sand onto their lots they could do so, and so could the city raise their houses, and could be responsible for damage. The city and the company wanted to do it, said they, but we are not going to pay for it.

The City and the dredging company simply turned their face away, and now, eighteen years after, throughout all those years, the land still lies in ugly vacancy, low as formerly, with rough streets and poor sidewalks on Laburnum Street, almost unchanged since they were built in 1911. For many years the lots—all of them—remained vacant; since the war, a few have been built on; on the north side of the railway there is scarce a vacant lot. During all these years they have been paying taxes on useless property on the south side which might have long since been built upon or sold—the lots are practically unsaleable.

An illuminating commentary on the futility of greed.

In the winter of 1930–31, all that area north of Cornwall Street, bounded by Yew and Arbutus streets, soon to be a park, was filled with earth, drawn by wagon, taken from the tunnel to contain the great sewer constructed on the hillside above, from Mount Pleasant to Jericho. The northern boundary of this area is the street car tracks. In 1931 it was still a mass of earth mounds. The grass plot, behind the beach, and between Whyte Avenue and the tennis courts was made into a lawn, but not used, in 1930. The old eyesore is now a beauty spot.

20 JULY 1931 - FIRES AND FIRE BRIGADES.

Memorandum of conversation with Mr. J.A. Mateer, of 900 7th Avenue West, a very early pioneer, and who has resided at this address since 1903.

Mr. Mateer said that the engine shown in the photo as pumping water, with a building "RAND BROS." in left distance, is pumping water out of a fire tank at the corner of Granville Street and Dunsmuir, where now stands the stores and offices of the B.C. Electric Railway Co.

"It may be the first fire engine which Vancouver possessed, but it does not look familiar. It looks more like a 'La France' engine; the first engine was a Ronald's fire engine, manufactured in Toronto, and the name plate 'M.A. MacLean,' the name of our first mayor, was on the engine when it arrived. Further, the man standing beside it does not appear to be 'Daddy' Cameron" (Alex Cameron.) "I would not like to say it is not the first engine, but I do not think that it is.

"The first engine was tested on the Cambie Street wharf, a short wharf erected just after the Great Fire, and which ran out into Burrard Inlet at the north end of Cambie Street. The first stream hit Mayor M.A. MacLean and Mr. Tom Dunn, the chairman of the Fire and Water Committee. I know, because I was the nozzle man."

Query: Intentional?

"Of course it was; just an 'accident,' only don't say so; a joke.

"I think Mr. Findlay is wrong when he says the engine was christened; I do not recall any christening ceremony. The name plate was on it when it arrived.

NOTE ADDED LATER:

Think the date this engine was tried out was on the evening of 2 August 1886. Think there is an account of it in Vancouver News.

"As to the pressure; there was no pressure. There was no water; none other than in those tanks. Vancouver had no water supply other than wells. We relied on seepage to fill the tanks. One tank was at the corner of Dunsmuir and Granville, another at the corner of Carrall Street and Powell Street, in the sort of square formed there by Carrall, Powell, Alexander and Water streets; and opposite Scuitto's fruit store which stood on the sharp angle formed by Alexander Street and Powell Street, where the Europe Hotel now stands; another at the foot of Richards Street on the junction of Richards and Water streets, and a fourth between Columbia and Carrall on Oppenheimer Street ." (Now Cordova Street East.)

Mr. Mateer laughed and confirmed the narrative, dated 3 July 1931, and headed "Fires and fire engines" of Mr. Geo. L. Schetky. He continued:

"The photo is an early hose reel team, not Vancouver, I think, Nanaimo, because here are Ernie Van Houten, Bert Peck and Cassels the half breed. It is taken in front of the old hall, No. 1, on Water Street."

Note: the photo is of a group of fire "ladies," a hose reel, an open (sliding) door, and one man only in a dark shirt. It is a very early Nanaimo Fire Company, perhaps 1888 to 1890, and the full list of names is shown on the photo in the Archives. A copy of the photo has been sent to the Bastion, Nanaimo, for preservation.

Mr. Mateer also confirmed narrative by Mr. H.P. McCraney, 10 July 1931, re Great Fire of 1886.

"When we organised the first fire brigade, we appointed a secretary, and kept careful minutes of our meetings. We had company meetings once a week, and department meetings once a month, and the company meeting minutes were written into the minute book of the department, but our first secretary, Barney Beckett, died suddenly, and was succeeded by Dave Thomas, and in the transfer the minutes were somehow lost. I have asked Dave Thomas twenty times if he has or had any idea where the minutes got to, but he does not know. It is a great pity they were lost, or cannot be found, for there are many points which they would settle, which now arise. Of course, when it became a paid department, we ceased to take the former interest.

"Ex-Chief J.H. Carlisle, for so many years the fire chief of Vancouver, was not the first fire chief. The first chief was Sam Pedgrift, who absconded with the funds of a minstrel show which the

firemen put on. No matter how much we dislike it, how much we esteem Mr. Carlisle, the fact remains that Mr. Carlisle was not the first fire chief. But he has always been considered as such, and treated so, but 'history is history.'

"I rather think the 'M.A. MacLean' fire engine arrived before Mr. Carlisle was fire chief.

"I do not recognise this building to the right of the tent," he said, on being shown the photograph of the ruins of Vancouver after the fire. "The building here is the Regina Hotel, on the corner of Water and Cambie streets, but this is, I think, a scow house; there were a number of scow houses which escaped destruction, and it looks more about where Mr. Cates, old Mr. Cates and his family, father of Captain J.A. Cates, had a scow house and a ship yard down there. I think the point is more where Captain Cates lived than where Andy Linton had his boat house." (At foot of Carrall Street.)

DUPONT STREET, NOW PENDER STREET EAST.

"Dupont Street was, at that time, a street on piles. I walked over the stringers when they were building it. The tide came right up to the corner of Dupont and Columbia Street," said Mr. Mateer.

THE FIRE ENGINE "M.A. MACLEAN."

"The first test of the first fire engine Vancouver had was made on the Cambie Street wharf in the presence of Mayor MacLean, and Thos. Dunn, with myself at the nozzle," said Mr. Mateer. "We pumped the water out of the sea."

21 JULY 1931 - McDONOUGH HALL, OLDEST BUILDING IN DOWNTOWN DISTRICT OF VANCOUVER, 1931.

"The first big ball in Vancouver was held in the McDonough Hall," said Mr. W.F. Findlay. "The building is now used for some sort of a mission, that is, top floor, with stores of various sorts on the street level. It is at the southeast corner of Columbia and Hastings Street, and is, I believe, the oldest building in downtown Vancouver, a wooden building approximately fifty feet facing on Hastings Street." (See photo in Archives.)

"It was built in the fall of 1887, and finished in 1888. At the time people remarked, as they saw it in process of erection, 'Why the — did he go out in the woods to build it?' It was a grand ball, and, if I remember rightly, Dr. Bell-Irving and Mr. (afterwards General) J. Duff Stuart were floor managers. It was a really 'grand' ball, the supper was on the upper floor; the lower floor, even at that time, was stores, or rather, a grocery store."

NOTE ADDED LATER:

"I would not say 'first big ball.' I do know this, that it was the first of the St. Andrews and Caledonian Society." W.F. Findlay, 12 April 1932.

LOTUS HOTEL, ABBOTT STREET.

Years ago, Mr. Campbell of the Vancouver Fire Department, and formerly assistant chief at the fire hall which, about 1904 onwards, stood at the southeast corner of Ninth Avenue and Granville Street, and who lived on the northwest corner of Pacific and Howe streets, told me that one evening in the early days, he wandered into the Sunnyside Hotel and was persuaded to buy, for one dollar, a ticket in a raffle for a lot. He did not want the ticket, but took it, and put it in his pocket.

He got the lot at the northwest corner of Abbott and Pender Street West, kept it for many years, and finally, approximately 1908, sold it for many thousands of dollars—between \$25,000 and \$75,000.

J.S. Matthews