

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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one on Hastings Street, another on Pender Street, both about one hundred feet from the railway crossing; another was discovered beneath a mattress.

"The little morgue building was lighted by candles—there was no electric light or gas here then—and in the feeble illumination, a procession passed in and out all night; some were searchers bringing their sad burden; others distracted fathers and mothers looking for their little ones. Their faces and hands were grimed with sweat and charcoal dust; their clothes were such as they had when they first ran. When the dawn broke, they were still searching.

"One incident is that of two elderly people, strangers to the city. I met the old lady on Carrall Street, deeply distressed; she said she had lost her husband. I consoled her and went on. A little further on I met her husband, also deeply perturbed, until I told him I had seen his wife up the road and, turning around, pointed to her sitting on a black root at the corner of Hastings Road and Carrall Street.

"It was never known, and never will be, how many lost their lives. Of all the remains found, three only, those found at the corner of Hastings and Columbia streets, were recognisable by their features; then, too, we made an effort to keep the number as low as possible. Three bodies were taken out of a well down near St. James Church on Cordova Street East; at the time, there were some shacks down there. They were evidently husband, wife and little daughter, and must have been strangers, saw the fire coming, rushed away, and seeing a well, jumped into it. There was three or four feet of water in the well, and their clothing was unharmed by fire, but their faces were livid; the fire had, apparently, swirled over the well, and they had been suffocated, not burned. They were well dressed; the lady had gloves on her hands. It was the gum and pitch which made the fire so terrible, so fierce, and created a black, bitter smoke more smothering than burning oil.

"The fire occurred at a time when families and others were scattered; that is the explanation of how so many were separated from their kindred. It was early on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the midday meal was over, some had gone to Sunday school, others out for pleasure. Most of the people were new arrivals, and, the men folk especially, took the opportunity of the bright Sunday afternoon to look over the townsite, the very shape of which, now so familiar, was then, just after the falling of the trees, strange even to many who might be called 'old-timers.' The town was new, and the thought uppermost in our minds was, 'Would it grow east or west of Carrall Street'; the question was debated at every corner; many were off spying out the land. Then, with terrible swiftness, the fire came upon them; each had to fly to save their own life; there was no time for reuniting."

THE FIRST CHURCH SERVICE AFTER THE FIRE. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. REVEREND C.L. THOMPSON.

"No, I'm afraid not," smiled Mr. Gallagher. "I'm afraid we did not pay much attention to church or Sunday school. On Sundays we were too busy working; hauling lumber, clearing, building the city again. But there is a little story I want to tell you about.

"On Sunday afternoon, the Sunday after the fire, about two p.m.—it happened on Cordova Street, just a little west of Carrall Street on the north side of Cordova Street—Reverend Mr. Thompson, the Presbyterian clergyman, came along and suggested to the workmen who were grading Cordova Street and covering it with planks, three by twelve planks, that perhaps they ought to cease work for a moment and give thanks to the Almighty for their escape the previous Sunday. Everyone in sight laid down their tools; the teamsters left their horses standing. Then they picked up the empty spike kegs and some planks and carried them into an empty store in process of erection for Geo. L. Allan, the boot and shoe merchant, and made rows of seats out of the kegs and planks. About one hundred and fifty went in to the service.

"Just at that moment His Worship Mayor MacLean came along and joined in the simple yet deeply impressive service. The men were, of course, in their working clothes; the service was not long, and was soon over.

"At its conclusion those big, rough, hardy bushmen paid as gentle a compliment as ever I have witnessed. The service over, none moved; they all stood motionless while His Worship moved down the rude aisle. His Worship halted at the entrance, and stood to one side, Reverend Mr. Thompson on the other, and both shook hands with each member of the impromptu congregation as they slowly departed from the half-finished building. Then the men went back to work to make Cordova Street passable."

"NORTH AMERICAN CHINAMEN."

From *Canada's Great Highway: From the first Stake to the Last Spike* by J.H.E. Secretan, 1924. (Mr. Secretan, a civil engineer, [was] in charge of selecting right of way, etc., C.P.R.)

Page 44: "When the Canadian 'tenderfeet' began to immigrate into the country they were not particularly welcome; their ideas were too small, and parochial to suit the man in the mountains" ... "he could not understand them at first" ... "the smallest coin in the country was a twenty-five cent piece, which was known as 'two bits'; a half dollar was 'four bits,' and no one had ever heard of anything so small as five or ten cents until the Canadians arrived, so I suppose those lordly pioneers looked down in pity on the lowly emigrants when they mentioned such currency, and called them 'North American Chinamen.' They thought them mean."

"NORTH AMERICAN CHINAMEN." R.H. ALEXANDER.

"The expression 'North American Chinamen' may have been used previously, but I do not think so. I will tell you of the first time I heard it, and I have always understood that it was Mr. Alexander who coined it," resumed Mr. Gallagher.

"A few days prior to our first election, a strike took place at the Hastings Sawmill. Quite a number of navvies who had helped to build the railway for Onderdonk had come back from the construction of the roadbed. Most contracts for this work were finished in the fall of 1885, and the roadbed work was pretty well complete. These navvies had got work at the Hastings Sawmill for the winter and at, I believe, \$1.25 per day; I am not certain whether this sum included their board and lodging or not; I rather think it did." (Note: in 1898, the author worked in a Puget Sound sawmill for \$1.00 per day of 10 hours, and 25¢ extra for two more hours, 6 to 8 p.m., and paid 50¢ a day for board and lodging at the company boarding house.) "These navvies prompted the strike of early April 1886, probably ten days before the first civic election in which Mr. R.H. Alexander, the mill manager, was one of the two candidates for first mayor of Vancouver.

"A conciliation committee of merchants and business men was appointed at a meeting held under the Maple Tree, and was requested to interview Mr. Alexander; I was one, the late Mr. Fulman Rutherford of Lulu Island was another. Mr. Alexander received us very cordially, told us that, for many years prior to that winter, he had run the mill successfully with Indians and some Chinamen, that he was quite willing to take back the men who had gone out—his old white employees had stood by him, and the mill was not shut down—but that he would not reduce the hours.

"The following evening, the committee reported back to the meeting, again under the Maple Tree, conveyed their report, and added that they had promised to report back to Mr. Alexander what the men decided to do.

"But the men would have none of it, and when we went to Mr. Alexander for our second interview, and gave him the men's answer, he replied that he would just engage a few extra Indians and Chinamen, and it was then that he made the remark, 'Canadians are only North American Chinamen anyway.'

"Mr. Alexander was a splendid man, but the remark, made undoubtedly in a moment of exasperation, was very costly to him afterwards in the first civic election."