

Early Vancouver

Volume One

By: Major J.S. Matthews, V.D.

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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THE GIANT TREES.

“The timber on the higher levels, that section centred about the Hotel Vancouver and ‘Hudson’s Bay’ was the choicest stand of timber I have ever seen; it was very heavily timbered with enormous trees. One tree which stood on Georgia Street between Granville Street and Seymour Street was thirteen feet thick at the stump; even at two hundred feet from the butt it was three or four feet in diameter. It is the same tree which is shown in the well-known photograph of a real estate office, with a placard “VANCOUVER LOTS FOR SALE”; it never was a real estate office, that was merely a joke. The hollow butt, which forms the shelter of the supposed office, was burned out in the fire of 1886. The burned butt was cut off—there is a photograph extant showing what was cut off; also one of the stump, which I have—and the remainder cut up into sections so that they could be put together again, the sections shipped to the Old Country, where it was put up in some gardens for exhibition.

“When the tree fell, it fell along Georgia Street—northwest and southeasterly.

“The men who cut down the forest where now stands the most important business section of our city—that is, roughly from Cambie Street to Burrard Street, north and south between creek and inlet—adopted the expedient of cutting the backs only of the smaller trees, and then let a big tree down upon them; the whole thing would go down with a crash, like a lot of ninepins. After the first attempts at this system were proven successful, they enlarged it, and as the falling progressed southwards towards Davie Street—they had started from Burrard Inlet and worked south—a whole section of ten or more, perhaps twenty acres, would go down with one great grand sweeping crash. The axemen cut down the firs and cedars only; the smaller trees were knocked down, crushed, smashed. There were great numbers of vine maple, and many of them were bent down, only to spring back and stand erect again. When the fire came, the Great Fire, it was largely through this abundance of slashing fallen earlier in the summer, and very dry, which caused the fire to rage so fiercely. At the time of the fire, the trees were cut down at least as far as Drake Street, with the exception of a clump east of Homer Street where the C.P.R. had a reserve, of which more by and by.

“People of today may gather some conception of the general appearance of all that tract mentioned if they will imagine brush, limbs and timber to the depth of ten feet or more deep, lying strewn over the ground in an almost solid mass in every direction; a dry spring and especially with a little wind; an ideal setting for a gigantic fire.

“Reverting back to the big tree on Georgia Street: there is extant a photograph of the butt section of that tree showing two men in front, and a shed behind. That photograph must have been taken some time after 1886, for there were no sheds up there until the land was cleared; then there were several sheds in which the workmen kept their tools and supplies, and where a saw filer worked. You will notice in that photograph there is no sign of the greater part of the great trunk of the tree, just the butt length with burned butt. The probability is that the photograph was taken in 1887 or 1888, after the smaller but more perfect sections had been shipped to England, and while the sheds used in clearing the land were standing. The burned cavity in the butt was not more than five or six feet deep.

“I have heard that Mr. Devine, who has that photograph, says that the butt section was nine feet diameter at the small end, and was thirty feet long, and that the tree was shipped, in 1886, to the Indian and Colonial Exhibition.”

THE GREAT FIRE OF 1886.

It was remarked to Mr. Gallagher that the *Sun* newspaper had published an article on a Great Fire anniversary some four or five years ago, in which was stated, and had never been denied, that the Great Fire started in the neighbourhood of Hastings Street, say, from Seymour to Hamilton Street.

“The fire broke away before ten o’clock that morning,” resumed Mr. Gallagher. “I was there and saw the fire myself. It was down near Drake Street that the fire started, along near Homer Street, west of False Creek. On several occasions, articles have been published, notably Major C.

Gardner Johnson, and W.F. Findlay, nephew of Lewis Carter of the Carter House, recounting the story of how the fire started, and no doubt they gave their views exactly as they saw them.

"The C.P.R. men were clearing the roundhouse site, and the fire got away from them. Where now stands much of the C.P.R. railway yards was formerly a great bay of False Creek, the shore of which is now very roughly defined by the western boundary of the yards and tracks, but the old shore swept in a great curve, and passed close to the foot of Helmcken Street and foot of Beatty Street; there has been an enormous lot of filling in. The roundhouse site was exactly where it is now, at the southern end of the reserve, the latter being bounded by Homer and Smythe streets, of the C.P.R.

"My firm, Percival and Gallagher—Mr. Percival was an experienced man; I was just a young one—had the contract for building the C.P.R. roadbed from Hastings and Carrall Street to the roundhouse site. Our camp—we had forty men—was located on the shore of False Creek, in a little bay just west of—perhaps 250 feet—the present Cambie Street Bridge. A small brook which drained the water from two smaller rills which met in a fork, entered the bay near our camp, but we drew our drinking water from a hole in the ground. Our camp was, at high tide, almost within two feet of salt water."

THE START OF THE FIRE.

"I was up at the roundhouse at 10 a.m. that Sunday morning, and at once put some of our men to the assistance of the C.P.R. men who were trying to keep the fire under control; at the time, we did not even dream that anything so serious as afterwards happened would occur. I am not quite sure that it was the C.P.R. men who were fighting the fire; I rather think it was men employed by the Townsite Commission, that is, R.B. Angus and Lord Strathcona, trustees of C.P.R. lands, and in whose name all lands were held and disposed of. At ten o'clock that morning, I accompanied our three men who had volunteered to help fight the fire up to the roundhouse, stayed with them, and returned with them to our camp for lunch. Both the C.P.R. men and our men went to their lunch, and after the meal our men went back to continue their assistance, but upon their return the fire had got away and was out of control, and by three o'clock was raging through the old town. While up there, I saw that the fire was growing very dangerous, and as we were leaving, I cautioned our three men that if the fire got away from where it was semi-cleared of slashings, that they were not to attempt to fight it, or they would lose their lives. After lunch we parted; they went down to the fire, I went down to our office on the south side of Hastings Road, now approximately Alexander Street, about where the entrance of the North Vancouver ferry is.

"I secured our books and money—payday was nearing—but there was not much time. I had been in our little office but a few moments when I saw through the window a rabble of people running by. They were coming down Hastings Road from the direction of the Deighton House, Gassy Jack's place. I went out on the road, walked up towards Gassy Jack's, but by the time I got there the Sunnyside Hotel across the street was a mass of flame, and before I could get back to the office I had just left, that was on fire too; I had not even time to save clothing.

"Before I left our camp, the fire had gained such momentum that it was impossible to see the sky; the air was just one mass of fiery flame driven before a strong rising southwest wind.

"The remainder of our men were forced out of our camp on the False Creek shore, and driven into False Creek. Some of them had taken the precaution to dig a cavity in the roadbed, into the slope of the fill facing the creek, and in it they buried some of their belongings and camp supplies, so that we had food to eat until supplies came from Victoria and Seattle—both Victoria and Seattle sent a boatload. Some Indians encamped on the other side of the creek, where Leamy and Kyle's mill was afterwards, now the site of the Vancouver Lumber Company, came over in canoes and rescued our men and took them across the creek to their encampment.

"But our three men who had helped fight the fire were never heard from again. What became of them we never actually found out; they had a month's pay coming, which was never claimed, nor did we find the remains or hear from the relatives. Their disappearance remains a mystery to this day. They were men who had volunteered to go and fight the fire; sterling men of splendid