

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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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

character; not such as would have remained unheard from. There is little doubt that those brave men perished in a gallant attempt to bring the fire under control.”

VANCOUVER CONSUMED BY FLAME.

“The city did not burn; it was consumed by flame; the buildings simply melted before the fiery blast. As an illustration of the heat, there was a man (driving horse and wagon) caught on Carrall Street between Water Street and Cordova Street; man and horse perished in the centre of the street. The fire went down the sidewalk on old Hastings Road, past our office, so rapidly that people flying before it had to leave the burning sidewalk and take to the road; the fire traveled down that wooden sidewalk faster than a man could run.

“I waded out into the harbour at the back of our office, between Carrall and Columbia streets now, with hundreds of dollars of pay money in my pockets, and nearly suffocated. The heat was so intense that we had to stoop down almost to the surface of the water to get our breath. There was a current of cool air close to the surface of the water we were standing in, between the heat and smoke and the surface of the water; we breathed that, and it saved us.

“Word that Vancouver had been destroyed reached the outside world from George Black’s at Hastings; Hugh Keefer, who had the contract for the construction of the roadbed from Port Moody to Vancouver, had a telephone—the only one.

“As soon as the news reached New Westminster that Vancouver had been destroyed, the city officials sent out young men on horseback who rode up and down the streets shouting that Vancouver had been burned, and the people without food. Truly splendid services were rendered wholeheartedly by the people of New Westminster. They immediately began to collect provisions, and the housewives to put up parcels of food, practically to the last fragment they had. That afternoon and evening, the New Westminster Fire Brigade, the ‘Hyacks,’ helped to collect it.

“In the meantime, a messenger had arrived on horseback in Vancouver, saying that food for women and children was coming, and all the blankets they could send. Mayor M.A. MacLean and Chief of Police Stewart sent messengers to the places where the people were huddled together for the night, and advised them to assemble at the south end of Westminster Avenue, just over the bridge—now the northern part of the Canadian National Railway ornamental gardens—and the only practical place to assemble, for the most of the rest of Vancouver was unapproachable, a mass of glittering lights in the darkness of the night, smouldering embers and smoke. The city had been swept clean, save for a half a dozen buildings on Westminster Avenue, the Regina Hotel, and a few floating scow houses. Mr. Alexander’s house and one other adjoining also escaped.”

“Mayor MacLean’s call to assemble was followed by what was probably the sorriest looking procession Vancouver had, and I hope ever will see, and long to be remembered by those who witnessed it. Hungry and temporarily despondent women, children and men who had lost all they possessed, some even their clothes, straggled in twos, threes, or larger downcast groups, along that rough old trail through the woods in the blackness of that dark, dreary night, and gathered together to await the arrival of food.

“At twelve midnight, two wagonloads of eatables arrived at the south end of the bridge. They had hastened by a rough bush trail, a wagon’s width wide, the ‘New Road,’ now Kingsway, then a mere furrow fringed with scrub through the forest. The weaker and the elderly were served first, both food and blankets; the men got what was left.”

NOTE ADDED LATER:

It was the Knights of Labour who did most.