

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

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Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1932.

Supplemental to volume one collected in 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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A.M. WHITESIDE, K.C.

"We saw the Great Fire from New Westminster."

A.M. Whiteside, 1932.

EARLY DAYS IN VANCOUVER. MRS. EMILY STRATHIE. MRS. EMILY ELDON.

Manuscript written by Mrs. Emily Eldon, 1150 Alberni Street, at request [of] Major Matthews following conversation at Pioneers Picnic, Newcastle Island, 15 June 1932.

The one redeeming feature of the Great Fire, the anniversary of which the pioneers celebrate each year, is that it impressed indelibly upon the minds of those who lived through it, conditions as they existed at that period of the city's history. Other days may have vanished from our minds, but memories of that event, of Vancouver, its environs, and the people of that day, are as clear now as they were a week after the fire.

WATER STREET BEFORE THE FIRE.

Our little home was on Water Street, facing the sea, and about the middle of the block between Abbott and Cambie streets, almost directly opposite the Methodist church and parsonage. My husband, Mr. Alexander Strathie, a Scotchman, and I were in Winnipeg when, through the North West Mounted Police, we first heard of Vancouver, and started off via Chicago and Seattle. Seattle was a little bit of a place, and I recall wondering, as we approached it by train, how anyone could live in a place like that. We arrived in Victoria in 1885, stayed there a year, there was little use coming on to Vancouver then; there was nothing here for him to do, and in the spring of 1886 we came on to Vancouver.

Water Street was not a street at that time; it could hardly be termed a road for it dipped down to the contour of the old shore, and the two-plank sidewalk from the parsonage to the Deighton Hotel dipped with it.

Rev. Joseph Hall was living in the parsonage at the time of the fire. I knew the Rev. James Turner, and also the Rev. C.M. Tate, the Indian missionary; he just came and went. Two or three little narrow paths led up and down the shore, up the bank of the shore in front of our house; worn by the Indians constantly going backwards and forwards to their canoes on the beach. The shore was littered with big boulders, and kelp; there was no sand.

VANCOUVER'S FIRST TEA ROOM.

My husband engaged in the contracting business; he leased a lot [*Lot No. 2, block 5, O.G.T.*] from Mrs. Mowat, and built a small house, as I have said, facing the sea, and opposite the Methodist church and stable. The little restaurant sometimes referred to by pioneers as mine was not actually a restaurant or café or anything of that sort. What really happened was this.

Before the fire people used to come over from New Westminster; it was a good long drive in a buggy, and sometimes they wanted a cup of tea and something light to eat. There was no place where such could be obtained in Granville; at the hotels there was a bar, and the dining room open at regular hours, or you could buy biscuits at the store, and munch them on the roadway, but there was no place where a person could get a cup of tea and a piece of cake or toast. People used to ask me, before "The Fire" to give them a cup of tea, which I did, at first doing it to oblige them, but it got to be a habit with the people, so I said to Mr. Strathie, who did not care very much for the idea, "I'm going to put in a couple of tables." That was all the restaurant there was to it.

STANLEY PARK BEFORE "THE FIRE."

It had been our custom, my husband's and mine, to take a walk on Sunday afternoons; sometimes, indeed frequently, we went towards the west, along a narrow trail which led from Water Street in the direction of Coal Harbour, and English Bay. The trail led along the top of The Bluff, it ran between what is now Pender Street and Seaton Street, [*Hastings Street West*] passed John Morton's clearing, just a little clearing, less than an acre with a board shack big enough for

two people, and wandered on towards what is now the entrance to Stanley Park. It was a narrow track, lined with bushes so thick and close that it was necessary for a woman to draw in her skirts close around her legs to avoid her clothing being torn.

THE FIRST STANLEY PARK “BRIDGE.”

At almost the exact spot where, first the bridge, and afterwards the present causeway was built, was the narrowest point of Coal Harbour—that was why the bridge was built there—an enormous tree had fallen across Coal Harbour, and its trunk formed the first primitive crossing into our great park, or as we called it then, The Reserve. It was an enormous tree with its roots still attached. Where it came from I don't know, likely blown over, perhaps drifted in. I never saw such tremendous limbs on a tree. Tree and branches rest in the mud and water, which, when the tide was in, was fairly deep. I recall how gingerly we crossed the trunk of that tree, and how my husband used to exclaim, “Now, be careful, don't fall into that water.” I was young then, and enjoyed the scramble across the tree trunk; once on the far side we hopped from boulder to boulder till we got to dry land, and then strolled down the skid roads until it was time to go home again. They were getting shingle bolts out. I rather think it must have interfered with boats and canoes entering the head of Coal Harbour, for it was right in the water.

AN INTERRUPTED JAUNT—THE GREAT FIRE.

Well, on the particular Sunday afternoon of the fire, our midday meal was over, and together with a friend, a Mr. Haslam, we had decided to take our usual tour. There was a lot of smoke about, at that time a more or less continuous condition; we were accustomed to it, but on that day it was particularly bad, and towards two o'clock it became so dense we could hardly see; perhaps that was the reason we wanted to go for a walk, to get out of it for a while. There had been talk that someday or other the great piles of debris of clearing—great pyramids of roots up on the hillside all ready for burning—would take fire, and burn us up. Cordova Street, west of Abbott, and as far as the present C.P.R. station, was being cleared for plowing. The orders were not to set fire to the piles of wood until a wet day, but the ground was everywhere covered with that peculiar kind of brown covering of decayed leaves and wood, common in a forest, and which when dry smoulders like a punk stick. The ground was extremely dry, perhaps someone had dropped a match or cigarette or something; perhaps a bit of fire had been smouldering for a week, and needed nothing other than a wind to set it going as a fire. Anyway, after our meal, Mr. Haslam and Mr. Strathie said they would go off and take a look at the fire while I prepared to go out with them. And off they went.

A BURST OF FIRE.

While Mr. Strathie and Mr. Haslam were away I prepared to go out. We did not indulge in much preparation or dress. Clothes such as one would wear in a city were out of place in Vancouver before the fire. I had on a cheap print dress and slippers, and went upstairs for some purpose. I was also wondering what was keeping my husband and Mr. Haslam so long. To the west of our house, separated by a narrow passage of, perhaps, four or five feet, was a similar house. At our back, on the lane, and facing Cordova Street, was a very pretty house, newly built, newly painted, the property of George Black, and it had recently been elaborately furnished. Surrounding us, particularly across the lane were a good many small trees and bushes, in fact, the new house was built among them. Cordova Street was, of course, opened up, but it could scarcely be called a street.

I had just entered a bedroom, and was standing momentarily, when with astonishing suddenness, a great sheet of flame swept before my eyes down the narrow passageway between our home and the next house; for a moment I was bewildered; it was so startlingly sudden, and more or less mechanically, I suppose, I grasped my husband's hat which lay on the dressing table, and as I slipped out of the room I had but a few seconds earlier entered, the windows crashed in; it was a remarkable experience.

Almost simultaneously, I heard my husband calling from below, “Come quick, come quick,” and then adding, “don't waste any time.” I rushed downstairs and he told me to dash straight across the street; right straight across. Upstairs was a trunk, it contained fine clothes, some jewellery and

treasures, some my husband's, some my own; we kept them in the trunk for the reason that they were quite unsuitable for wear in the rough and ready old Granville; they were proper enough for a city, but not for Granville; too conspicuous altogether. He bolted upstairs, got the trunk and dragged it across the street to where I was waiting on the shore, then over the bank, down the Indian path—one of their little trails—and out onto the wet beach where he deposited the trunk on two good sized boulders.

We were cut off by the fire, there was no escape, neither to the eastward nor to the westward; one thing alone remained, take to the water, and we were not long about it either.

THE LUMBERJACK'S HASTY RAFT.

On the shore were a number of people, including two lumberjacks, and those two lumberjacks certainly were wonderful men, in their great big gum boots up to their hips. Out of the loose lumber near at hand, ready for building a store for a tailor, they and others, made a clumsy raft by placing beams and planks crisscross one upon another, and onto this rickety pile of lumber—no nails or fastenings—it was done in a great hurry, fifteen men and two women scrambled as we pushed it out into deeper water. Mrs. Ben Wilson's father, Mr. Morris, I think that was his name, had gout, or something, anyway he was a cripple and could not use his legs, was placed on the raft, and of course the farther we pushed it out from the shore the deeper it sank for its human load was far too heavy for it, until finally the water was up to Mrs. Ben Wilson's father's neck; he was sitting in the water, the rest of us were in the water up to our middle and each clutching each other, for our foothold was extremely unsteady, and we had to hold on to each other in order to keep upright. Anchored some distance from the shore was one or two dinghies from pleasure boats. We were all clutching to keep on the raft as best we could; Mrs. Ben Wilson was appealing to save her father.

Then my husband said he was going to swim out to one of the dinghies, and take me with him, but I said, "No, you cannot make it," but he said he could, and I said, "No, you go alone, you will never be able to make it with me, we shall both drown." I could not swim.

We tried to push the raft out still further; the fire was all around us, and the flame was coming right over. Then at that moment, a little steam pleasure yacht from Moodyville, I do not know her name, but she was owned by a Capt. Butler, and had just come in the inlet from New Westminster, saw our plight, and by careful, clever manoeuvring—she had to work and worm her way in to avoid the flames—reached us. We got onto her, and I was put in the captain's little pilot house. I was so cold my teeth were chattering, I could scarcely articulate. We were taken down to Andy Linton's wharf, which was a float running well out into the water; there were some boats there, got into those, and rowed out to the hulk *Robert Ker*; we were the second boat load to reach her.

THE ROBERT KER.

At that time the *Robert Ker*, afterwards dismantled, and for many years used as a coal hulk by the C.P.R., was an idle sailing vessel floating at anchor; she was owned by Mrs. E.B. McKelvie's father, Capt. Soule; anyway, she was in charge of a caretaker, employed to prevent theft of her sails and equipment. The first boat load of people to reach the hulk had been refused, so we were told, to be allowed aboard; the stupid man had said he had orders to keep people off; that was what he was paid for, and threats were made to throw him into the water before he could be induced to let the rope ladder down, but when we arrived there the people were aboard; that must have been about three in the afternoon. Once aboard there was nothing to do save stay there. My possessions consisted of my print dress and slippers I stood in, and my husband's hat; my husband lacked a coat. In time the fire dwindled, the excitement calmed down; all that was left of Vancouver was the soil.

RECOVERY OF THE TRUNK.

Towards evening I began to wonder how my trunk had fared. As you know, in June it is light almost until ten o'clock. Then, when I saw the caretaker with a pair of field glasses, I asked for the loan of them. He enquired what I would like to look at. I replied I would like to see where I had

lived. I searched the shore with the field glasses, but no sign of the trunk, so I determined to go in search of it. I got a boat, and a man rowed me over—my husband did not want me to go, so I went away without him knowing, he said it was useless to go over—and just as we reached the shore I saw a couple of Indians coming down the little path I have told you about; one of them, an Indian woman, had a little red and white thing in her hands, a little thing just a few inches long. I recognized it as the pincushion my mother had taught me to make, and it had been in my trunk. I enquired of the Indian woman where she got it, and she replied, “just there,” pointing; she had picked it up floating in the water. The tide had come in. I requested the man who had rowed me over to put his hand down into the kelp; he did so. The first thing he brought up from the bottom was a handful of kelp, and hanging onto the bottom of the kelp was a little black thing which arrested my attention; miraculously it was my little gold locket, burned black by fire. I told the man to keep on. The next thing he brought up was my husband’s silver watch, now in the Vancouver Museum, or your Archives, wherever you are going to put it. I have kept it forty-six years, though as a watch it had been valueless. Further efforts produced nothing save burned fragments of a blouse or a skirt. The locket and watch, being heavy, had probably sunk lower and lower as the clothing burned, and were thus preserved. The locket chain, however, being light had probably remained in the burning clothing, and had melted together. This incident may seem trifling, but it gives people of today some idea of the terrific heat and force of the fire. My trunk was placed so far down on the beach, so far from the bank which was dry land, that it was amongst the kelp, and when retrieved, covered with water the depth of a man’s reach, the heat must have been so intense as not only to complete the destruction of the trunk at a distance, but with such completeness that a metal chain melted together.

Subsequently a Victoria jeweller made the black gold locket as good as new; it was gold, and I have it yet.

As I returned to the *Robert Ker*, I heard shouts, “Here she is”; my husband had said it was “no good” going ashore, and when he missed me became alarmed, and thought I might have fallen overboard.

Note: W.E. Graveley’s metal office sign, bearing their firm name, was placed beside a stump for safety after removal from his office entrance; all that was afterwards found was a lump of metal on the earth. Similar instances are numerous.

How Mrs. Hall [*Rev. Joseph Hall*] and her children got onto the scow I do not know. The Rev. Joseph Hall was away at Eburne preaching, and had the horse with him. He possessed also two cows [*Mrs. J.Z. Hall’s narrative, Early Vancouver, 1931, Matthews.*] Someone opened the stable door, and let them out. One, the big white one, went out in the inlet, and kept swimming in and out from the shore; I recall how she would blow—like a whale—and thus saved herself. A dog—I think he was deaf—did the same thing. The other cow was afterwards found dead across the Indian trail down the bank just west of the stable. It seems to me that the stable was west of the parsonage, and the hall—after it, the hall was built just before the fire—to the east of the parsonage. All were on one lot, they were close together, right in front of our place.

John McLennan’s place was up near the corner of Cambie Street—west of the Carter House; I think Scoullar’s hardware store was east of the Carter House, next door.

REESTABLISHMENT.

The new steamer *Princess Louise* with a lot of Victoria passengers came in the next morning about ten o’clock; she should have been in earlier, but had been delayed. The passengers all went back, of course, to stay in Vancouver was impossible, and I went with them. Mr. Strathie and I talked it over, and decided that I should go to Victoria and try to get things started again; he remained behind to prepare a new home. He admonished me not to stop too long; I said it might take a week. So away I went, my only clothes were my print dress and my slippers; my hair was all loose, those were the days of long hair, and I had lost all my hairpins.

At Victoria I had much to contend with. There were no chartered banks in Victoria at that time, nor in Vancouver; money was deposited in the Post Office Savings Bank, and the Post Office

required thirty days notice. I presume the regulations would have been suspended in such circumstances if it had been possible; perhaps they had not the actual coin or notes on hand to meet such a sudden demand. Anyway, I could get no money out of the Post Office Savings Bank, and did not know what to do.

To cut short a long story of bewilderment I will simply state that I was walking up the street when I met Mr. Brown of Brown Bros., the grocers. We knew each other, but I had had no business dealings with them. He stopped and enquired if I was one of the victims of the fire, and I said I was. The outcome was that he said he would try and get me some money, and took me to the private banking firm of "Kishner Green"; no, I don't know how to spell it.

Mr. Brown presented me to a man at the counter whom I had never seen. The man asked, "how much did I want?" I replied, "\$500." I added that while it was very good of Mr. Brown to identify me, at the same time Mr. Brown was almost a stranger to me, knew nothing of my affairs, and that, kind as he was, his identification was of very little real value as he knew nothing of my circumstances, but that if the gentleman at the counter would give me the money I would give him my check for it. He kept looking me up and down, and I kept trembling in my shoes. I was getting quite nervous; fear that I should be refused. Presently he said, "All right, I'll give it to you," I gave him my check, my husband's account and mine were joint.

Some fifty graniteware kitchen utensils were given me, I bought a stove, I got more things and in about seven days returned to Vancouver, carrying among my possessions a much treasured present, a great roast of beef.

A HEROINE OF THE GREAT FIRE
Mrs Alex. Strathie. Water st
Built June 1886, Demolished 1910



No. 118 Water street. Lot 2, Block 5, O.G.T. Erected by Alexander Strathie during week after Great Fire of 1886 on site of former home. Demolished April 1910. See narrative Mrs Alexander Strathie, later Mrs Emily Eldon, "Early Vancouver", Matthews, 1932.

Photo Apr. 1910.

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REBUILDING A HOME AGAIN, ON WATER STREET.

Mr. Strathie was rebuilding when I arrived; a two-storey home, No. 118 Water Street, on our old leased lot on Water Street; the floor was down, the scantling of the frame was up, and part of the siding, perhaps three or four feet, but there was no roof. The Hastings Mill was but a small mill in those days; once every two months or so a sailing ship would come in, her cargo would be ready for her on arrival, and she took some time to load too, but when the great demand for lumber for rebuilding Vancouver was thrown upon them it was beyond their capacity to meet it, so that the lumber was apportioned out, and that was the reason so little progress had been made, during my seven days absence, in the construction of our house.

HASTINGS MILL WHARF.

“Whether the construction of the C.P.R. wharf at the foot of Granville Street had been started or not I am not sure; certain I am that it was not being used. Hence I went down to the Hastings Mill, where all the freight was being landed, to get my household possessions; the kitchenware presented me was missing; it had been checked off the steamer; the shed was blocked with stuff coming in. There was some confusion; it was a reconstruction period; at least the shed was cleared, but no kitchenware. The checker enquired its value. I replied, “\$12.00,” and was given the sum, and bought more at the store, but all I could get was tinware. The stove was set up on our lot on Water Street in the open; there was no other place to do it. Presently men began to come around and ask for a meal. I told them I had nothing for them. “But,” they said, “we know you have.” I asked them how they knew; the answer was that they could smell it; the aroma of the cooking was spreading over the adjacent area. I told them the roast was just a small one I had brought from Victoria, but eventually they got some of it. A lot of strangers came from many places to see the ruins the fire had caused.

GEORGIA STREET “IN THE STUMPS.”

We remained on Water Street until 1889; we lived in the upper storey subsequently, and rented the lower to Mr. George Melven to use as a jewellery store. Then we moved to a new home “out in the clearing.” There were only two houses on Georgia Street, one belonged to Mr. Cambie the C.P.R. engineer—on the southeast corner of Thurlow and Georgia streets; ours was on our first sixty-six foot lot in the 1100 block further west, between Bute and Thurlow, south side; afterwards we acquired two more sixty-six foot lots adjoining; we had to cut our way through the brush, small trees, and stumps, to reach it. That would be in the summer of 1889.

[signed] Mrs. Emily Strathie.

Note: Mrs. Emily Strathie afterwards married the late George Eldon, City Park Ranger (or superintendent) for many years. There are no children. The home at No. 118 Water Street was demolished in April 1910. (See photo with Mrs. Eldon and Mr. Eldon standing in the doorway, also a bicycle, the day demolition was in progress.)