

## **Early Vancouver**

### **Volume Two**

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

**2011 Edition (Originally Published 1933)**

*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 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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Footnote or Endnote Reference:

Major James Skitt Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011), 33.

Bibliographic Entry:

Matthews, Major James Skitt. *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2. Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011.

### **Contact Information**

City of Vancouver Archives  
1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J9  
604.736.8561  
archives@vancouver.ca  
vancouver.ca/archives



were seats for the “common crowd” distant from the elite by a few inches only. In all, the boxes on each side of the small theatre probably held six persons (twelve persons in all) and these of course could reach down to those sitting in the seats in the middle of the theatre.

In the back was a very small gallery of some sort.

In the front was a tiny ticket office—about the size of a telephone booth.

In latter years the building was used, first as a moving picture house. I am under the impression that the first moving pictures regularly shown were shown there; afterwards half a dozen cheap nasty moving picture houses sprung up on Cordova and Carrall Street in several disused stores. After the war I think the building was used as a commercial warehouse—butter and cheese, etc.—and finally I think A.R. Gun and Co., the confectionary wholesalers, used it as a distributing warehouse.

In 1898 and for some years after, A.G. Ferrera, later the Italian Consul, conducted a restaurant about three doors west of the “Grand Theatre.” It was an excellent restaurant with small boxes, hung with heavy curtains. The cuisine was perfect, and it was famed far and wide. As with the theatres, so with restaurants; it was either the Hotel Vancouver or the Ferrera restaurant, known as “The Savoy.” It was a tiny affair as restaurants go now, built on a 25 x 120 foot lot, but it was exceedingly well conducted and the food was the best money could buy.

It followed then that the leaders of Vancouver society would drive up in their carriages, or perhaps hired broughams or hansom cabs, step daintily to avoid any little mud there might be on the macadam road, and sail into the boxes, where they observed all the forms of a more resplendent edifice, and after the “show” was over, would repair to the Savoy in all their finery for supper; and there, too, the waiters and others performed their parts with equal delicacy. It was a pretty performance of good manners in primeval surroundings; they lived to fare better, but not with greater grace.

One of the celebrated performers at the Grand was Jim Post, to my mind quite the equal of Harry Lauder or Charlie Chaplin, and others have agreed with me.

J.S. Matthews

## **THEATRES.**

3 July 1931, J.S.M. The first theatre in Vancouver was Hart’s Opera House on Carrall Street, the second was the Imperial Opera House, then came the Vancouver Opera House. The Imperial Opera House was built by Crickmay and Robson in 1889. The Vancouver Opera House was built about the same time, but whether before or after has not been checked up. Prior to this there had been Sullivan’s Hall, Blair’s Hall, Keefer’s Hall, the former two on Water Street, the latter on Alexander Street, also the Methodist Hall, and the school house. Hart’s Opera House was also known as “The Rink” for roller skating.

## **THE GRAND THEATRE.**

In November 1898 when the writer (J.S. Matthews) reached Vancouver from New Zealand via San Francisco, there was a small theatre called the Grand Theatre on the north side of Cordova Street between Cambie and Abbott streets, still standing in 1933. It was a small affair on a twenty-five foot lot. In 1898 the Imperial Opera House was still in use, but as a Drill Hall. The only two theatres recalled as existing at that time were the “big” theatre, Opera House, and the Grand Theatre, and people alternated between one and the other.

The Grand Theatre’s stage was very narrow, probably 20 feet. There were boxes on both sides of the “auditorium,” just wide enough for one person to squeeze into, and sit sideways looking towards the stage; the passage way to them—they were entered from the back like all boxes—was almost impassible for narrowness; box holders sat one behind the other, in a row facing the stage. All the formality of etiquette prevailed by the users, “boiled” shirts with big white fronts, dress suits with wide open bosoms, and the ladies in low neck dresses; both arrived in four wheel cabs or hansom at the door, tiptoed through the mud to the sidewalk (wooden), and walked to their boxes. In all, the boxes held about 12 persons, and these could reach down to the commoner herd in seats in the middle of the theatre.

At the back there was a gallery of a sort. At the entrance was a tiny ticket office, about the size of a small telephone booth.

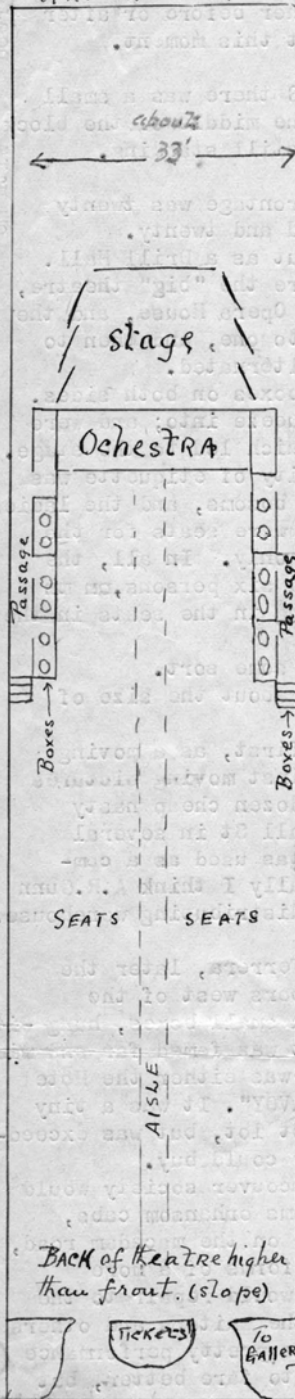
A.G. Ferrera, later the Italian Consul, conducted an excellent restaurant, The Savoy, about three doors east. The cuisine was perfect, there were small "boxes" where heavy curtains concealed the occupants from vulgar gaze; it was famed far and wide for its service. A tiny affair as restaurants "go" now on a 25 x 120 lot, but well conducted and food of the best. For the very elite the Vancouver Opera House and the Hotel Vancouver was, of course, the "proper" thing, but for the lesser socially elite, and the "young bloods," why, the Grand and the Savoy.

Vancouver was full of transients at the time, many on their way to the Klondike gold rush, many merely attracted to Vancouver, and, of an evening, they congregated outside the "Grand" entrance to watch the leaders of society enter from their carriages, broughams and hansom, step daintily across the mud of the macadam road, and sail into the boxes with all the formality of entering an imposing edifice. After the "show" was over, they repaired, in all their finery, to the "Savoy" for supper, and there, too, the waiters, etc. performed their duties with similar grandeur. It was a pretty performance of good manners amidst primeval surroundings; they all lived to fare better, but not to exceed with greater grace. One of the celebrated performers at the Grand was Jim Post, quite the equal of Harry Lauder or Charlie Chaplin of later days.

Years afterwards the building was used, first as an early moving picture house, and the impression prevails that the first moving pictures were shown here. After the war the building was used as a commercial warehouse—butter and cheese—and finally, now, I think A.R. Gunn and Co. is using it as a distribution warehouse for a wholesale confectionary business.

The early moving pictures were shown in half a dozen cheap, nasty moving picture theatres on Carrall and Cordova streets—converted empty stores. The Grand Theatre was afterwards known as the Savoy Theatre.

Plan (from memory)  
**GRAND THEATRE (as in 1899)**



where they sung the  
 "Ucerated song"  
 (illustrated)

Cordova St  
 Plank sidewalk  
 Macadam Road

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## THE GRAND THEATRE.

As an indication of the colourful old Grand Theatre's entertainment style, the following is extracted from the *Province* of unknown date (about 1930).

### "AS THE TEARS RAN DOWN HIS WHISKERS"

Twenty-five years ago, when Hastings Street West from Cambie to Carrall was just a byway, and the main traffic stream flowed down Cambie and along Cordova streets, a popular amusement resort was the Grand Theatre. Situated on Cordova Street within easy reach of a dozen hotel bars, offering cheap entertainment (box seats 25¢), it appealed to Vancouver's rough and ready population, especially those sections of society which felt that the Opera house up on Granville was too tony.

The Grand put up hearty vaudeville with more than a suggestion of Elizabethan humour. And a regular feature was the illustrated song (before moving pictures and with lantern slides coloured "fiercely," usually some sickening love scene, or perhaps something about "Mother" or "away down south.") The jokers of that day called it "ulcerated song," and certainly some would give you a pain. Crudely coloured slides, showing young men and young women going mournfully over a lake fitted most of the words which dealt with a longing to be "back home."

"On the Banks of the Wabash" was the favourite, and so was "The Green Fields of Virginia."

Fortified by visits to the adjacent bars, in a sympathetic mood, the audience just swallowed up such sentiments as:

#### "ULCERATED SONG"

'Though I'm living in a mansion now  
With wealth at my command,  
My heart is longing for it every day,  
Where I spent life's golden hours  
In the vale of Shenandoah-oah-oah  
'Mid the green fields of Virginia far-har away

Throaty tenor or beery baritone, standing in the wings, would put all he knew into "them sentiments."

But the prize of the lot was the "City of Sighs and Tears." A quarter of a century has rolled over the writer's snowy locks, but he can still quote this gem:

"Poppa, tell me where is momma?"  
Asked a leettle cheild wan day;  
"I'm so lonely here without her,  
Poppa, where is momma, pray?"  
Poppa placed his arms around her  
As he sadly bent his head,  
And as tears ran down his whiskers  
These woids to her he said:

#### Chorus.

"Down in the city of sighs and tears  
Under the gaslight's glare,  
Down in the city of aching hee-arts  
You'll find your momma there,  
Walking along where each painted face  
Tells its story of wasted yee-ars  
And perhaps she'll be thinking of you tonight  
In the see-hitty of si-highs and tee-ars."

And, believe me, this lured laments from loggers, moans from miners, sighs from sailors, and tears from tramps.

♦   ♦   ♦

**A**N old friend who traded to the port of Vancouver years ago recalls in a letter the amusement seafaring fellows used to find in a vaudeville show on Cordova street, the old Grand. In **BALLADE** those years an accepted form **PATHETIC.** of entertainment was the illustrated song — known to the seagoing lads as the “ulcerated” song. A tenor who used lavish gestures and put much sentiment into the ballads stood in the wings and dolefully rendered songs, while gaudily-colored lantern slides were shown on the screen. The prize one was known as “The City of Sighs and Tears,” and went something like this:

“Poppa, tell me where is momma,”  
Said a little chee-ild one day.  
“I’m so lonely here without her.  
Poppa, where is momma, pray?”  
Poppa placed his arms about her  
As he wiped a tee-ar away  
And to his lee-ittle lassie  
These words to her did say:

“Down in thuh see-ity of si-highs and  
tee-ars,  
Under the bright lights’ glare,  
Down in thuh see-ity of busted hearts  
You’ll find your mu-huther there,  
Walking along where each pay-hainted  
face  
Tells its sto-hory of wa-hasted yece-ars.  
But perhaps she is thinking of you to-  
ni-hight  
In thuh see-ity of si-highs and tee-ars.”

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