

Early Vancouver

Volume Three

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

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1935)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1933-1934.

Supplemental to Volumes One and Two collected in 1931-1932.

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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Colonel Hulme afterwards commanded the 62nd Overseas Battalion, the third battalion to leave Vancouver.

“ARCHIVISTS WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD.” SIR ARTHUR CURRIE.

About April 1932, Gen. Sir Arthur Currie passed through Vancouver on his way from the Orient to eastern Canada, and was, one afternoon about four, informally entertained by a large assemblage of ex-overseas officers who had gathered together to shake hands, chat, and drink a cocktail in the “Oval Room” of the Hotel Vancouver.

Prior to 1899, a large wooden shed served as the first drill hall in Vancouver, and General Currie, as former Corporal Currie of the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery, Victoria, had once entered it on a holiday event when the Victoria battalion had paid a visit to the 2nd Battalion in Vancouver. In 1931, the many regiments of Vancouver subscribed together to erect a memorial to mark the site of the old drill shed, and General Currie was invited to unveil the bronze tablet, but being indisposed in health, he declined, so the memorial was taken to the Oval Room for him to see. The shining new bronze tablet, bearing in part the words, “HERE STOOD THE DRILL SHED,” was suitably placed upon an easel, and, conducted by a group of senior officers, General Currie was escorted across the spacious room to view it; Major Matthews, City Archivist, Vancouver, long known to General Currie as a collector of military relics and records of British Columbia, as well as an old friend of many years, was among them, and had been responsible for the proposal, creation and design of the tablet.

The general stood in front of the tablet for a moment or so, gazing and reading, and then, placing his hand on Major Matthews’ shoulder, said with much feeling, “Gentlemen. Men like Matthews here are worth their weight in gold.”

He then continued with some reminiscences, etc.

“Men like” an archivist must naturally include all archivists.

Just why Gen. Currie expressed himself thus must forever remain unknown, but it *might* have had something to do with his then recent unfortunate experience when he had to defend himself in the courts against unjust and libellous statements that “he sacrificed his men,” and that the records fortunately kept—as all military units have to keep—served in some especially useful way to vindicate his actions in the Great War.

Romantic Story Of Vancouver

MAY 12 1936
CITY ARCHIVES'
RECORD

38 YEARS OF COLLECTING

Many of the pictures which appeared in the Jubilee edition of The Vancouver Sun were from the office of Major J. S. Matthews, city archivist. The story which follows concerning Major Matthews and his efforts to establish the Vancouver archives will be read with unusual interest.—EDITOR.

When subscribers to The Vancouver World (now The Vancouver Sun) picked their papers off their doorsteps one morning in the winter of 1898, they discovered that in addition to the regular news they were being presented free with a fine panoramic view of Vancouver.

It was duly admired.

By night-time some copies of it were to be found in garbage cans wrapped around the day's garbage.

More careful people put theirs away, saved them for a few days, a few weeks, a few years . . .

Today, five copies are known to be in existence. Owners of four of these value them at from \$50 to \$100 each.

But you couldn't buy the fifth for any sum. It's the one Major J. S. Matthews lifted from his doorstep that winter morning 38 years ago.

Today it is in the City Archives, with countless other material about Vancouver and its history that the Major has been collecting ever since.

START OF ARCHIVES

That panoramic view was the start of the archives, though no one, not even Major Matthews, realized it.

For the archives began as a hobby.

Today, two tiny rooms on the tenth floor of the temporary city hall are crammed with pictures and historical matter . . . much of it typed by the Major from stories he has obtained first hand from the pioneers. There are three volumes on "Early Vancouver" of which he is the author.



Major J. S. Matthews

In those small rooms, it is possible to reconstruct the entire story in word and picture from that day in 1792 when Captain George Vancouver first sighted Burrard Inlet.

From there, material has gone out in the past six months which has brought this city before the attention of a large portion of the world.

On April 6 of this year, the 50th anniversary of Vancouver's incorporation, three great British dailies, "The Times" and "The Morning Post," London; and the "Manchester Guardian" published half page illustrations of Vancouver past and present, furnished by the City Archives.

HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY

This month, 10,000 copies of "Vancouver, a Short History" prepared by students of Templeton High School, were put into circulation. Much of the material contained in this attractive and accurate booklet was furnished by the City Archives.

These are only two instances of the immense amount of work being done by the archives.

The hobby which Major Matthews became interested in 1898, became in 1929 a voluntary, unpaid job. A job of preserving the historical records of the people and city of Vancouver.

At first he worked at his own home, but in 1931, the Public Library granted use of the attic of the Old City (or Market) Hall, Main Street.

'DIRTIEST ROOM IN B. C.'

It had no heat, light or water, and was described at the time the Major took it over in June, 1931, as "the dirtiest room in British Columbia." Years before, a pigeon had got in and been unable to get out. Its bare bones still lay on the floor. A hole in the floor looked down on a toilet below. A board was shoved over this. Plaster had fallen from the ceiling in great chunks and against one wall a wooden ladder led to the roof above.

The Major carried in his filing cabinet . . . a cardboard carton.

For furniture he had a discarded desk which was in danger of falling to pieces if moved and a bar-room chair.

He had no official standing, no salary and no allowance for expenses. Every time an old picture or old book came his way, he dipped into his own pocket to pay for it.

When winter came and his attic office grew cold, the Major put on his overcoat and kept on working.

SMALL BEGINNINGS

The day he put his first paper in its cardboard filing box, he looked at the solitary document lying loose at the bottom, soliloquising:

"You poor thing. You're the beginning of the record office for a great city. Mark my words."

Vancouver City Council, under Mayor L. D. Taylor, appointed Major Matthews first City Archivist in June, 1933, with an honorarium of \$25 per month out of which he had to defray his own expenses. The archives which had been at his home, were now brought to a tiny room on the City Hall's tenth floor.

At the beginning of the fiscal year 1934-35, City Council voted the archivist \$500, his honorarium was raised to \$50 a month and another room was added.

When Sir Henry Myers, director of the British Museum, visited the City in 1932, he told Major Matthews: "What appalls me is the astounding difficulties under which you labor."

Today, though the facilities are improved, the archivist is laboring under perhaps even more trying conditions, for Vancouver's Jubilee Year has increased a thousand-fold the demands made on his office.

"These are busy days," the major admitted, "British, United States, Canadian and local press, industrial and commercial firms, and students from our schools, give us very little rest."

The "us" referred to is himself, his secretary, Miss Margaret Giles, and occasionally a volunteer worker. The present accommodation is woefully inadequate.

AN OLD-TIMER

Although he does not come himself under the class of original pioneers of

Vancouver the major is an old-timer here.

Born of an old Welsh family at White House, Newton, Montgomeryshire, Wales, in 1876, he was educated privately in England and in public school and university in New Zealand, where he accompanied his parents in 1887.

In March, 1898, young Matthews set out from Auckland to see the world, traveling steerage on the R.M.S. "Alameda," bound for San Francisco. He reached Vancouver Nov. 3, that year.

JOINED IMPERIAL OIL

Joining the Imperial Oil Company as an office boy, he is one of the three British Columbia employees in the office at the corner of Cordova and Cambie Streets.

He recalls that in those days, when he resided at the corner of Burrard and Pacific Streets, he cut firewood on the clearing west of Burrard; picked blackberries on what is now Davie Street; and that below Burnaby Street, Burrard Street was a narrow track through stumps.

It was a cross-country trail from Pacific and Burrard which the new "office boy" walked each morning to Robson and Granville.

Gradually he rose in the company's employ. He can recall selling the first can of gasoline to the first auto owner in British Columbia and making the suggestion which led to the Imperial Oil Co. building its first gasoline station here—the first on the North American continent.

The Major's military record began in 1903 when he joined the 6th Regiment, D.C.O.R., Vancouver, as a private. During the Nanaimo coal riots in September, 1913, he commanded that regiment. He was company commander of the 102 (Comox-Atlin) Overseas Battalion, C.E.F., raised at Comox in the winter of 1915-16, and was responsible for the change of name to "North British Columbians."

FOUGHT AT YPRES

Major Matthews was present in action at Ypres, Aug.-Sept., 1916; led his unit in the assault and capture of Regina Trench, Oct. 21, 1916, and was severely wounded. Subsequently he served in Belgium, France and England and in 1918 was loaned to the American Recruiting Mission as lecturer on the Pacific Coast of United States.

PRESENT "ARCHIVES"



More up-to-date, but still totally inadequate to serve their purpose, are the present quarters of the City Archives. This is one of the two tiny rooms on the tenth floor of the temporary City Hall in which is stored material that tells the entire history of Vancouver. Original documents, including maps, pictures and pioneers' stories, are all preserved here.

While in the No. 4 London General Hospital recuperating from wounds in 1916, the Major devised the "Trench Fire Cube." This cube, about the size of a walnut, was made from heated and compressed paraffine wax and sawdust, capable of heating about a quart of water to the boiling point.

After the Anglo-American Oil Co. of London had, without profit, made and sold some millions, Major Matthews received an order from the commander-in-chief, Earl Haig, to supply enough for one army to make a test with a view to adopting the little article as an official issue to all troops.

The war ended, however, before this could be done.

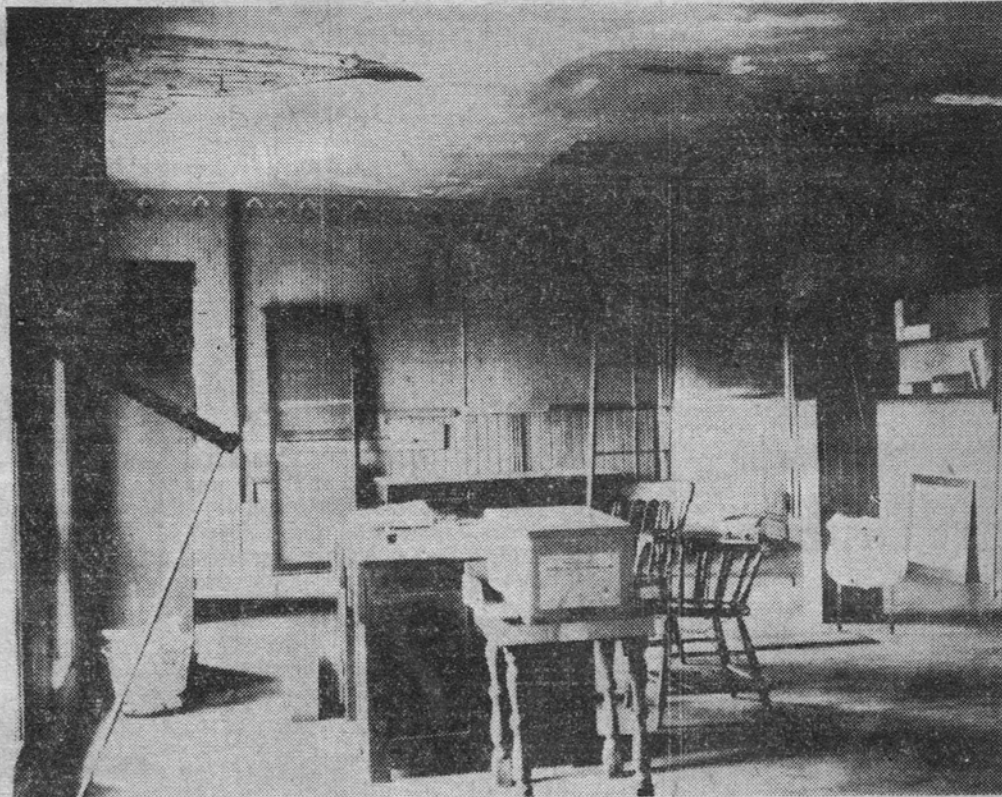
Now, with the war and his business activities behind him, Vancouver's archivist is concentrating his entire effort to building up archives.

He is very proud of a remark General Sir Arthur Currie made about him when he passed through here just before his death. Before an assembly of distinguished military officials following the dedication of a memorial tablet the general, putting his arm on Major Matthews shoulders, said: "Gentlemen, men like Matthews are worth their weight in gold."

"But," the major will tell you when telling about this incident. "The Archives mightn't be here if it wasn't for my wife. She gives me help and encouragement."

MAY 12 1936

WHERE ARCHIVES WERE BEGUN



In this dilapidated room in the attic of the old City Hall, Main Street, the City Archives found their first home in 1931. Note the plaster off the ceiling, the old bar-room chair, the ancient desk and the cardboard box which served as filing cabinet. A square of board, to the right, covered a hole in the floor. It was unheated and without light or water. When winter came, Major J. S. Matthews, archivist, worked in his overcoat, and when darkness fell, he had perforce, to go home.

MAY 12 1936

Item # EarlyVan_v3_033

City Archives,
Room 1016
Temporary City Hall
16 Hastings Street East
Vancouver, B.C.
29th August 1935.

Dear Miss White:

May I have the pleasure of expressing to you the tardy but most hearty thanks for the splendid manner in which you indexed the third volume of "EARLY VANCOUVER."

Those who do not understand the patience and persistence necessary to make an extensive index to a book of 450 pages replete with detail, might not appreciate the inordinate amount of labour which it involves as fully as I do consequent upon personal experience.

The endeavour you made has resulted in an index which does not annoy whenever referred to, owing to its lack of "never showing what is wanted"—as some indices do—but appears to have taken in everything.

It is an exquisite piece of work, and I hope you will accept my compliments, my gratitude, and my thanks.

I have the honour to be, dear Miss White,

Your obedient servant,

J.S. Matthews
CITY ARCHIVIST.

Miss Elsie White.