

Early Vancouver

Volume Three

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

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

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frights had made Vancouver nervous, and, too, Stanley Park was in danger. Our first fire boat, a tug, was improvised, and pumped water; the park was saved. Oben won the struggle but lost his fortune.

Phillip Oben was a discoverer. Vancouver's water supply first flowed beneath the Narrows about midnight, March 25, 1889, but none knew positively where it came from. Oben undertook to discover the source of the Capilano River. Together with Capilano Joe and another Indian as guides he set out—no trail existed—each carrying sixty pounds of “grub,” rifle, and blankets, followed upstream, crossed and recrossed waist deep in water, until finally, high up on the precipitous mountainside they found a lake, frozen solid in June, crossed its surface, reached the topmost ridge, food became exhausted, and, half starved, they descended into Howe Sound where they were succored at a pioneer cabin on the shore. Chief Joe (Capilano) said Oben was the first whiteman to traverse those parts.

The pioneer often pays for his courage; Oben paid well for his. He came with wealth of one sort; he departed with wealth of another. He left us a legacy more priceless than jewels; the memory of indomitable courage, of service to his fellows, an honored name, and a gallant sailor son.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH MRS. FLORENCE OBEN, WIDOW OF THE LATE PHILLIP JOHN WILLIAM OBEN, OF VANCOUVER AND CENTRAL PARK (WHO DIED 4 JULY 1933).

Mrs. Oben was responding to the request for photographs of Mr. Oben by J. White, photographer, corner Oppenheimer and Carrall streets, which shows them at the time Mr. Oben cleared the forest off part of the West End (1889-1890); the other, of Mr. Oben only, taken by an unknown photographer, and used in Judge Howay's *History of British Columbia*.

Major Matthews: (looking at photo) How like Sir Wilfrid Laurier!

Mrs. Oben: “Mr. Oben has been stopped on the street in Vancouver and asked if he was Sir Wilfrid's brother; I believe Sir Wilfrid had a brother visiting in B.C.”

OBEN FAMILY, GENEALOGY AND NAME.

“Oben is not the real name, properly it is Aubin, French Huguenot—they were of the French Huguenots driven out of France in the persecutions some three or four centuries ago, and settled in the nearest land of freedom, the Channel Islands. They were a family of note. My husband's grandfather on the maternal side, for instance, was Major De St. Croix” (English—Cross) “of the island of Jersey, where he lived in a manor house, and served in the island militia—hence his rank—the citizens were expected to raise for the defence of their islands. The major's daughter, Elizabeth, married Captain” (master mariner) “Phillip Aubin, my husband's father. Under the law of the land, the major's estate, at his death, was divided, each child—there were twelve—getting his or her share, the eldest son taking in addition the manor and its lands. My mother-in-law, Elizabeth Aubin, one of twelve children, got her share, one twelfth, in money.

“Elizabeth was a woman of extraordinary capability, and while her husband was at sea on his long trips, managed the family affairs alone. She placed the inheritance, and other monies of her own, in a bank in Jersey, but the manager speculated, the bank became bankrupt, and her money was lost. She had a brother, a Mr. De St. Croix, in Canada, and he suggested that she come to Canada, bringing her children with her. In the absence of her husband she made the decision herself, disposed of her farm—there were 27 cows—all jerseys—and with the money thus acquired proceeded to Toronto, arriving in May 1870, taking with her all her children save Annie and Elizabeth, both married, and one other; three in all, who remained behind in Jersey. Her children, all born in Jersey, were Phillip, my husband, the eldest child who came to Canada, 14 years old at the time; Frank, Carrie” (Mrs. Scott, died in Vancouver six months ago) “Johnny, also a pioneer of Vancouver” (John Oben's early bakery) “and Eliza.”

OBENS ARRIVE IN CANADA. TORONTO, MAY 1890.

“Mrs. Aubin had no sooner started for Canada than her sailor husband died suddenly; dropped dead while walking on some street in Newfoundland; she thus landed in Canada a widow with several children, my husband, Phillip, the eldest, a mere lad of fourteen, among them. Phillip had to go to work. She just

stayed in Toronto and Phillip was taken by his uncle and learned the building business, particularising with plastering; as her boys grew they all learned trades.”

HOW NAME AUBIN CHANGES TO OBEN.

“When the children went to school, the teacher very properly asked their names and recorded it, but the Channel Islanders had their own peculiar dialect, and the teacher put it down the way she heard it, ‘Oben.’ Evidently she did not trouble to ask how it was spelt; she might have asked them to ask their mother to write it on paper; she just wrote down Oben, as the children pronounced it, and Oben it has remained ever since.

“My maiden name was Florence Edith Grant” (sister to E.J. Grant, barrister, of Vancouver) “born in Paddington, London, of a family originally from Bratton, Wilts., near Salisbury Plains. I married Mr. Oben at the Church of Our Redeemer in Toronto, fifty-one years ago; we had celebrated our golden wedding before he passed away.”

AN EARLY FUNERAL.

“I was here before my husband. I came February 11, he came March 25, 1887. The doctor in Toronto ordered me away from the cold climate. My father brought me—my husband, mother, and brothers following as soon as he could make arrangements.

“The first funeral I saw in Vancouver was on Cordova Street; I saw it passing down between Abbott and Carrall streets. A girl had died; there was no hearse here then, so it was placed on top of a load of carrots which a man, they called him ‘Shorty,’ was taking out by horse-drawn wagon, of course to some farmer who had cattle out Mountain View Cemetery way; it was unavoidable, of course, there was not a hearse here; they simply had to use an express wagon.

FIRST HEARSE.

“The first hearse in Vancouver belonged to Frank Hart of Hart’s Opera House, and he stored it at Queen Bros., of the Stanley Park Stables, south side Georgia Street, between Granville and Seymour streets.” (Photo, Bailey Bros, in Archives.)

FIRE OF 6 JUNE 1887.

“On the night of June 6, 1887, we had a bad experience. There had been clearing fires at the rear of where we were living on Howe Street, and they got so bad with the high winds that we were in danger of being burned out. The Superintendent of the C.P.R., Mr. Abbott, came and told us there was a car on the track, and anyone who wanted to could go on the train and if it looked as if the town was going to burn up again, the engines would take the train away. As I was not very strong, having come to this country for my health, my husband insisted on my going with my father and mother and brother on the train. That afternoon a young girl had died and her father carried her dead body in his arms to the train and she was in the next compartment to us all night. Neighbours wished her father to bury her in his yard but he was afraid if the town did burn he would never find her body again. In the compartment on the other side of us were women and men from the Red Light district—Dupont Street it was, now Pender Street East. They were drinking, swearing, and it was just awful to hear them. It was sorrow and death on one side and Hell on the other, and all the time menaced by fire on all sides of us as we passed through blazing trees all along the track.”

METHODIST CHURCH, FIRST AT CENTRAL PARK.

“The first Methodist church in Central Park at Collingwood nearly, was started in this way. There was already a Presbyterian Church there, but an elderly lady, a Methodist, formerly a Mrs. Lawson, who had a son in Vancouver, but Mrs. Major by her second marriage, came to Mr. Oben, who was strict Church of England, as also I am, and said she did wish a Methodist Church could be started, as she preferred it to Presbyterian. Mr. Oben and I discussed the matter with her, and my husband said, ‘We have that big front room, you’ (addressing me) ‘have your organ,’ and so the church was started in our front room. The Rev. A.E. Green used to come out to hold the services in our house, and talk began to be of building a church. So Mr. Oben and others said, ‘Let us see Rev. Mr. Green.’ The next step was as follows. There was an old man, a Mr. Bunting, living on a lot which he had contracted to buy from Mr. H.A. Jones, a well-known early real estate man, but he was having difficulty in paying for it, so Mr. Oben went to Mr. Jones, a large

hearted man. Mr. Jones said in reply, 'I know this old Mr. Bunting will never be able to pay for the lot he is on; he's living in that old shack; if you church people will promise to look after the old man for the rest of his life, I will give you the lot as a present.' Ultimately he did. They agreed to look after the old gentleman, but he did not live long."

COLLINGWOOD METHODIST CHURCH. KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, COLLINGWOOD.

"The original Methodist Church was known as the Collingwood Methodist. It stood on Kingsway near Joyce Road, but it is gone now. The original Presbyterian Church was known as the Knox Presbyterian; both are now united as the Collingwood United Church."

BAPTIST CHURCH. FIRST IMMERSION.

"I have a vivid remembrance of the first church service I attended in Vancouver. It was a Baptist service held in a small room on Cordova Street. There were twelve people including the minister. The first baptism immersion was held in False Creek where a bridge used to cross on what used to be called Westminster Road. Now Main Street. This has all been filled in and now the railway stations are there."

NEWSPAPERS, *THE PROVINCE*.

"Roy, my son, now teacher and postmaster at Lasqueti Island for the last seven years, was the first boy who delivered the evening newspaper, *The Province*, around Central Park. The distances between homes was so great that his father bought him a pony so that he could ride around. He started with eighteen customers and before he quit to go to college, the route had been split up five different times, five boys instead of one. Roy did most of the soliciting."

(Edited by Mrs. Phillip Oben, and approved.)

REFERENCES.

Early Vancouver, Vol. 2, 1932.

Daily Province, 31 July 1933.

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CONVERSATION WITH MRS. FLORENCE OBEN, WIDOW OF THE LATE PHILLIP OBEN OF CENTRAL PARK, ETC., AT CITY HALL, 20 SEPTEMBER 1933.

Major Matthews: A letter from Mr. F.W. Hart, Prince Rupert, received recently, denies that a girl's body was transported to burial on top of a load of carrots.

Mrs. Oben: "It was. I arrived here in February 1887 from Toronto with my mother; I had been ordered to the coast for my health; we came together; Mr. Oben came a month later in March, 1887. Mother and I stayed at a boarding house known as the 'Maison Dorée,' which is French for Gold House, and it was built next door to the Dougal House or the southwest corner of Cordova and Abbott streets. It was while we were staying at the Maison Dorée that I saw the funeral I speak of; Mother and I stood on the sidewalk and watched it; Mother was horrified, and spoke of it frequently. It was before there was any system of burials; we were newly arrived, observant, and the rough and ready methods improvised startled us.

"We learned that a servant girl at the Dougal House had committed suicide. The coffin was taken out of the Dougal House, and placed on top of a load of carrots. The wagon was driven by a man nicknamed 'Shorty'—I knew him only by that name; he drove the wagon for Robert Grant, who kept a general store near the corner of Cordova and Carrall streets, next to Thos. Dunn's hardware store. Frank W. Hart's was right across the street. The wagon drove off up the Westminster Road way. The story is quite true; the only witness, besides myself, was, as far as I know, my mother, who is dead now."

Major Matthews: I don't think the Mountain View Cemetery was opened then—February or March 1887. They used to bury Indians and Chinamen on Deadman's Island, and take whites to New Westminster; do you suppose they were taking the body to New Westminster?

Mrs. Oben: "Perhaps they were; I don't know where they went to; they went off up the Westminster Road."

Major Matthews: Were there many carrots in the wagon?

Mrs. Oben: "Well, you know what half a ton looks like."

SMITH AVENUE, CENTRAL PARK.

Mrs. Oben is authority for statement that Smith Avenue is named after Maxwell Smith, the first postmaster at Central Park, and a well-known British Columbian.

PATERSON AVENUE, CENTRAL PARK.

Mrs. Oben also says, "It was named after D.C. Paterson, who had a boiler works—I think the Vulcan Boiler Works—in New Westminster; he has a son in Vancouver—a barrister, who went to the war, was invalided home, and died about 1931. The family live on Edmonds Street, Edmonds, B.C., right behind the Burnaby Municipal Hall."

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH MRS. PHILLIP OBEN, RELICT OF PHILLIP OBEN OF CENTRAL PARK, 28 JUNE 1934.

THE WEST END. CLEARING THE FOREST OFF. HOWE STREET.

"I came to Vancouver on February 11, 1887. Mr. Oben followed on March 25, 1887. Almost immediately Mr. Oben became engaged in building houses. First we built the houses on Howe Street, on the west side; there were two lots between our houses and Pender Street; there is a big garage" (537 Howe Street) "there now." (Note: the houses were south of the lane running east and west.) "That was the same summer as we arrived; Howe Street was graded that summer so that Mr. Oben could get his lumber in to build; the same summer as the fire scare of June 6th, 1887. Two of the four houses we sold to Dr. Bodington." (See *Early Vancouver*, Schetky, in Vol. 1, and *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2.)

FIRE OF 1887 (SECOND FIRE).

"At the time of that fire there were all kinds of people, a crowd of them, standing at the corner of Hastings and Granville streets; they were afraid that if our Howe Street houses caught, that the Leland Hotel, a great big wooden building on Hastings Street, south side, close to the corner of Granville Street, would catch too, and if the Leland Hotel got on fire, that great big wooden building would set the whole town on fire again."

GEORGIA AND JERVIS STREETS. SLASHING IN THE WEST END.

"Then, in the fall of 1887, Mr. Oben bought the property at the southeast corner of Georgia and Jervis streets. I know it was the fall of 1887, because the house was damp when we moved in. The timber" (trees) "were not standing; they had been felled, and the ground slashed, but the debris was lying on the ground because he had to clear it away before he could build. He built a small five-room house for us to live in. I was very poorly at the time, and it was while I was so poorly that he got the contract for cutting the forest off the West End. That was in the spring, or about" (1888), "the following year. It took quite a while to clear the forest off; that was done in 1889, and I don't think it was quite finished until 1890."

LORD STANLEY AND STANLEY PARK.

"It was being finished as Lord and Lady Stanley opened Stanley Park, because I remember being at the ceremony; there was a man named Avison—he was the first official in charge of Stanley Park, and lived across the bridge—and we were at Avison's place the day the park was opened."

OBEN'S CAMP.

"Mr. Oben's camp was down at the bottom, below Georgia Street, between Nicola and Denman streets, down on the waterfront where those ship-building places are now, a long wooden shack, 50 or 60 feet long, with a kitchen at one end, and the bunkhouse included under the same roof. It is nothing like this photograph numbered 56 which you say is in the Provincial Archives, and supposed to have been taken by Mr. Dally in 1867-70."

GEORGIA STREET TRAIL.

“After the Georgia Street Trail was cut, the land was comparatively clear of trees below Georgia Street; nothing like this photograph. Beyond the bunkhouse, further west, a half-breed woman—she had two daughters, and her husband was a ne’er-do-well white man—lived; the city evicted them, and there was a great to-do about it. They were squatters; had a garden there, and a little shabby sort of house. Mr. Oben’s bunkhouse was fifty or sixty feet long, but while the white men drove the oxen, it was the Chinamen who did the work; at one time, there must have been 150 Chinamen there; I remember, because they were always playing tricks on them, and some times in the middle of the night someone would strike the gong outside the cookhouse” (big steel triangle) “and get them all out of bed on the pretense that the place was on fire.”

CLEARING THE FOREST OFF THE WEST END. BULL PUNCHERS.

“Then there was a great runway for timber coming out of the woods; it shot out into the water; but below Georgia Street was all cleared land. I used to go down into the woods south of Georgia Street to see the oxen; I had never seen oxen being driven in the woods and I got into a ‘spat’ with one of the bull punchers. The bull punchers had a long pole with an iron spike on the end, with which they prodded the oxen when they thought it necessary, and I saw one bull puncher do this and bring the blood, and I told him what I thought of his cruelty; so they ordered me out of the bush, and told me to stay out.”

J.J. NICKSON. CAPILANO WATER WORKS.

“Before the work of clearing was finished, that is, the clearing of the trees from the brow of the hill to Stanley Park, Mr. Nickson came over from Victoria in connection with the Capilano Water Works, and went to live on Melville Street as our neighbour” (see T.R. Nickson), “and Mr. Oben and Mr. Nickson became very friendly; that was how Mr. Oben got connected with the water works and made the famous trip to Capilano.” (See *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2.)

CAPILANO WATER.

Joseph W. McFarland, secretary, Vancouver Water Works, called for tenders for construction of dam and weir at Capilano River on 23 December 1887. Some months later the contractor threw up his contract, and the work was completed by others.

The water first flowed through pipes under the First Narrows at ten minutes past eleven on 25 March 1889. (See *News-Advertiser*, 26 March 1889.) There is a very long report, and a very complete one, several columns long, of the whole history of the Water Works in the *News-Advertiser* about this time.

CONVERSATION, JUNE 1933, WITH J.W. MCFARLAND, FORMERLY SECRETARY, CAPILANO WATER WORKS BEFORE SALE TO CITY OF VANCOUVER

After telling him of W.F. Findlay’s recollection of Mayor Oppenheimer’s conversation with Lewis Carter re Capilano water pipes under First Narrows: (See *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2.)

“No, Bill Findlay’s wrong. How could Oppenheimer be advocating the Capilano Water System? Oppenheimer was mixed up in the Coquitlam Water Works scheme, which was defeated. Mr. Findlay must have been confused, or you have been, or some other explanation applies. I don’t know. What I do know is that when I cleared out our offices and sold Mahon, McFarland and Mahon to the Royal Trust Co., that I gave all my early newspaper clippings, etc., etc., to the City Engineer at that time; and they never said thank you. They were wonderfully complete plans. The early engineers surveyed all the watersheds; they even went up as far as—what’s the name of that lake the B.C. Electric Railway Company have been doing development works on? The Allouette, that’s it; they surveyed all around for water. All that work was done long before the Greater Vancouver Water Board came into existence. We had a charter to build a tunnel under the Narrows.” (Note: the above-mentioned papers are now in the Vancouver Public Library.)