

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.

About the 2011 Edition

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CONVERSATION WITH CAPTAIN HOLMES NEWCOMB, FORMERLY COMMANDER OF THE DOMINION GOVERNMENT STEAMER *KESTREL*.

EARLY SHIPBUILDING ON FALSE CREEK.

Major Matthews: I have an old photo of the Leamy and Kyle mill on False Creek; it shows two vessels being constructed on the stocks; they tell me one of them was the old *City of Nanaimo* steamer. Do you happen to know what the other one was?

Captain Newcomb: "*Thistle*. I don't know just what she was; not tug; sealing schooner, I think."

EXCERPT FROM *THE KITSILANO TIMES*, THURSDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER 1933.

OLD MILL IS DEMOLISHED.

RAT PORTAGE MILL IS BEING RAZED.

One of the familiar landmarks on the West of Granville Bridge is slowly disappearing. Since the fire in the abandoned mill last spring wreckers have been busy taking what good timbers remained in the old Rat Portage mill, and, in the last few weeks, have started to take down the large sawdust burners near the creek-side.

The old company's offices are now occupied by the Finnsson Lumber Co., who have established a retail yard across the street on Second avenue. They are much interested in getting suburban trade, and carry a full stock of all lumber that may be needed by any householder or carpenter. They still use the old Rat Portage Lumber Co.'s phone number Bayview 354.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH ISAAC HENDERSON, OF 1045 MELVILLE STREET, VANCOUVER, 9 JULY 1934.

HASTINGS STREET SQUATTERS. HENDERSON BROS. JOHN B. AND ISAAC. CEDAR COVE.

"My brother John B., commonly called 'Jay B.,' came to B.C. in 1875. He located at Chilliwack, near Popcum, and started to clear 160 acres with his newlywed bride. Got flooded out by the high water and had to build a raft to get wife away. He built about half of the town of Yale. He contracted to keep about 110 miles of the Cariboo Road, Yale to Cariboo, in repair during the building of the C.P.R. railway through the Fraser Canyon. The river rose again, washing out bridges and road. Was given a commission as Justice of the Peace for all B.C. He started the Dominion Sawmills, sash and door and furniture factory in New Westminster, afterwards the Royal City Planing Mills.

"He staked off a sixty-six foot lot on the south side of Hastings Street West, Vancouver, about 1884 or 1885, where the Columbia Theatre stood" (Lots 7 and part of 8, Block 29, D.L. 541) "and just east of Abbott Street South, after a fight with the C.P.R. his claim was allowed. His land was sixty-six feet frontage, which did not coincide with C.P.R. survey ideas; they surveyed the lots in twenty-five foot lots, so he afterwards bought the fraction, nine feet, from the C.P.R. He had quite a fight with the C.P.R. over it; there were four or five others who did the same."

DOMINION SAWMILLS.

"He was at that time manager of the Dominion Sawmills, and he put up a little shack, about ten feet square on the lot, and afterwards learned that an old cedar shake maker had gone to live in his little shack, so John came over from Westminster and made a deal with the old cedar shake maker to stay right there in the shack to hold it, and promised him half. Five or six of them had quite a time establishing their squatters' right. The property was afterwards sold for \$10,000."

(Note: an examination of the land registry records shows that the crown grant for D.L. 541 to the C.P.R. is dated 13 February 1886, and with certain exceptions, one being the old Court House Site—Victory Square—the whole area is granted to the C.P.R. It is therefore obvious that any arrangement re squatters rights was made between Mr. Henderson and the C.P.R.)

(Mr. Isaac Henderson, after reading and approving of above, says that the cases were subsequently—about a year—adjudicated in Victoria, and about four or five, of which J.B. was one, had their claims granted.)

(The Columbia Theatre stood on Lot 7, and west seventeen feet of Lot 8, Block 29 [42 feet frontage.] The National Theatre next door stood on east eight feet of Lot 8, and Lot 9 [33 feet frontage] east of Abbott Street, 62 Hastings West. See Cambie Survey, 22 February 1886, in Land Registry.)

FIRST SCHOOL TRUSTEES.

“John and myself had a wholesale grocery and food store on Cordova Street. John was one of the first three school trustees in Vancouver, with Dr. Beckingsdale, and Charleson of the C.P.R. The first school was situated about the corner of Cordova and Jackson Avenue. He built a shingle and sawmill at Cedar Cove.”

CEDAR COVE. E.H. HEAPS AND CO.

“He had a thousand dollars to start, and three hundred feet of water frontage and about seven hundred feet out into the inlet. When we started, shingles were two and a half a thousand, but by the time we got going they were selling for ninety or ninety-five cents, and E.H. Heaps, who had a mortgage of thirty-five hundred dollars, got possession of the property, including the house we built, where E.H. Heaps afterwards lived. John was always ‘missing things.’ Heaps wrote to him up country, where he was mining, asking what he would take for a quit claim to that mill property. W.H. Gallagher, the real estate man, still on Pender Street, advised him to claim for an equity, but he never bothered; same thing afterwards happened in Seattle, but he was so interested in mining. He could have been a millionaire. The property could have been sold later for a quarter or half a million dollars.”

GREER’S BEACH.

“Along with Sam Greer and Mr. Spinks they came very near getting 160 acres at Kitsilano Beach. He was also partner with Mr. Green, of Garesche, Green, bankers, and staked some hundreds of acres in what is now known as the Nicola Coal Fields on a half interest agreement with Green. Green died suddenly. John lost his copy of agreement with Green. He did not trouble the widow afterwards. This coal field was sold for \$150,000. John had no papers to show and did not bother the widow.

“Henderson Bros., myself” (Isaac) “and ‘Jay B.,’ were the first Hendersons in Vancouver. We brought in the first carload consignment of butter from the Eastern Townships, and also a lot of eggs from China. The Chinese eggs were all rotten. We threw them out on the manure pile at the back of the store, and now and then someone would kick one, it would explode like a bomb, and they would get” (laughingly) “the surprise of their life. That’s fifty years ago almost, and I can smell them yet. I tried to candle some, but they blew up in my face.

“John B. had ten children; three of the four sons were killed in the war, and the only other son is now living at Powell River. Of his six daughters, Mrs. Nelson is now a commercial traveller’s wife at Calgary; Mrs. Lutley lives near Wellington, B.C.; Mrs. Campbell” (dead) “was the wife of a government commissioner in New Westminster; Mrs.” (Eva) “Coughlan is in Calgary; Nellie is Mrs. St. John Miller at Calgary, and Mona is Mrs. Wilmot, a commercial traveller’s wife at Calgary. I am an old bachelor. J.C. Henderson had the general store at Chilliwack, and is a cousin of mine, and so was Dr. Henderson who practiced from Hope to Sumas; people used to send for him all over the country, and I have heard him tell that one night, when he was riding down the Cariboo Road, the water had washed out the road, and his horse slipped down the steep slope, and in the darkness he was afraid to move; and the mosquitoes were bad, so he had to stay there all night on the steep slide holding his horse, afraid to move until daylight came so that he could see.”

ISAAC HENDERSON.

“I came to Vancouver in July 1886. I picked up a newspaper one day in New York and read about the burning of Vancouver, but did not know there was such a place. After I got here I remember walking up to about the present corner of Hastings and Granville streets; just a trail winding in and out; the tree trunks were lying about criss-cross all over the place and there was a winding trail through them. Then the next year there was a fire up there” (6 June or 30 May.) “The place was all burning, so, after beating the fire

from 5 or 6 o'clock to midnight, I cleared out to the east end and let her burn; it was dry and there was so much rotten stuff about."

JOHN BAPTIST HENDERSON. HASTINGS STREET SQUATTER.

Extract from narrative entitled "Story of an Old Timer of B.C." by J.B. Henderson (Preserved by Isaac Henderson; copy in Provincial Archives.)

About this time I got a note from one of the Hastings Mill Co.'s loggers, named Gillespie, that he had a small boom of cedar logs for sale over at "Gastown," and suggested that I should come over and see them. As the mill shipped nothing but fir at that time, their logging contractors were allowed to dispose of any cedar they might have run across. So I went over, bought the boom, and then, struck with the appearance of the harbour, and with a vision of its possibilities, I said, "Jim, get a shack built for me out in the woods here some place, and I'll settle with you for it." "All right," he said, "I'll do it."

Shortly before this Mr. Webster who was always very good to me, told me one day, "Henderson, you go over to 'Port Moody' and pick out 3 or 4 lots of mine, I won't ask you for any money until you sell them and make something out of the deal, I've got hundreds of them."

Port Moody was then the Govt. Terminus of the C.P.R.R., and had quite a boom on at that time. I believe he repeated this offer once or twice. So one day I got a horse and rode over there, spent the day sizing things up, saw the tide go out, leaving the mud flats bare, with a small strip of deep water where the Govt. had built a fine wharf on steel piles.

It didn't appeal to me at all and I did not accept his offer; but "Gastown"—as Vancouver was then called—looked quite different.

So the shack was built, about 12 by 12, shed roof, with one small window, cost me 27 dollars, and it stood where the Columbia theatre now stands on Hastings Street. I got an old fellow named Hyatt to live in it and hold possession of it for me, promising to give him half of it if I ever got title to it.

Some 12 other men mostly mill workers, or doing something over there, had built themselves little houses, scattered around for their own use, but possibly I was the only clear "Outsider" at that time, with any vision of the future.

Years before there had been a town called "Hastings" laid out by the Govt. and some lots sold at an upset price of 200 each—one chain by two—66 by 132—but they had been taken off the market long before.

SAM GREER. GREER'S BEACH.

Going up to the Post Office one afternoon I saw Sam Greer (whom I had met at Chilliwack) standing on the sidewalk looking rather blue. He accosted me, when I stopped for a moment, and he told me all his troubles. It appeared that he and a man named Spinks had been struck with the possibilities of English Bay. They had found an old Indian who had been living beyond the line of his "Reservation" at Kitsilano for some twenty years. And he had agreed to sell out such interest as he may have had to them for \$125. Spinks had gone to Victoria to raise the money and be back by a certain date. The Indian was to be over by the time agreed on, and the money was to be paid over in the Indian Agent for that district, living in Westminster.

The day had come, the old "Enterprise" had arrived from Victoria—but no Spinks and no money.

This was the story he told me. Greer showed me a kind of an agreement ready for signature. "Now," he said, "John, if you can find the money for the Siwash, I'll guarantee you a third interest in this proposition." Of course I knew it was one chance in a thousand, but always ready to venture, I accepted the proposition—walked right across the street to the Bank of B.C., cashed my own cheque for 125 dollars and gave Greer the money—who left me with the expressed intention of going up to McTiernan's house to meet and pay the Siwash, and I believe this was done.

“Here endeth all that I find in John’s pencillings in his Memorandum Book.”

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH ISAAC HENDERSON, 13 SEPTEMBER 1934.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. HASTINGS STREET.

“I came here in August 1886. This photo, No. ?, is of the first church used by the Presbyterians after the Fire, up on the corner, on Westminster Avenue between Hastings and Oppenheimer streets. It was the one they used before they built the one called St. Andrew’s on the northeast corner of Georgia and Richards streets.

“You know, it makes me smile to think of it; to think of Hastings Street in the winter of 1886-1887 after I came and before we got electric light a year or two later. In the winter, a great big pool of water on Hastings Street between Columbia and Carrall streets, great big pool spreading out all over the land about there; it was low land, almost level with high tide” (see Hugh E. Campbell re building bridge on Dupont Street, and Mayor Oppenheimer’s brown book of printed reports) “and when, of a Sunday night, the people would be going up Hastings Street hill to the Presbyterian church on Westminster Avenue, they would use the stepping stones put down so that they could cross the pool. Not every one, but say one person in every little group, would have a lantern; a whole string of lights like fireflies, bobbing up and down in the dark.” (See George Cary and the Cordova Street lanterns.)

WESTMINSTER AVENUE. ST. JAMES’ CHURCH.

“There was a young fellow sparking Miss Welsh who used to go to St. James’ Church on Oppenheimer Street, and they came up from the Westminster Avenue Bridge way. Down by Prior Street the sidewalk was about six feet above the earth, and one night as she and her young fellow were coming along there was a yell. The young fellow, all dressed up for church, had stepped too near the edge of the sidewalk and fallen into the water.”

HASTINGS AND GRANVILLE STREETS.

“As I first saw the corner of Hastings and Granville streets, where the Post Office is now, the trees were all lying around; it was just a trail, and the water came up to the cliff on Cordova Street.”

THE FIRST HOTEL VANCOUVER.

“A story used to be told that, when Sir William Van Horne was visiting Vancouver about 1900, a gentleman approached him in the rotunda of the Hotel Vancouver and introduced himself as the architect of the hotel, and, the story goes—probably not true—that Sir William replied, ‘Oh, you are the fool who built this.’

“The story simply illustrates the fact that the first hotel was a bit of a disappointment from an architectural point of view; a glance at photographs of the exterior will prove this.”

INDIAN BURIAL GROUNDS.

Some of the Indians’ burial grounds, before the whiteman came, near Vancouver, were:

Deadman’s Island in Coal Harbour. See *Early Vancouver*, Joseph Morton narrative, etc., Hill-Tout, etc.

Foot of Howe Street, False Creek. A tiny low island covered with a bit of grass and with a tree or two on it, was known as “Smamchuze” (see Jim Franks, *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2.)

Two bare rocks off Point Atkinson. See *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2.

Defence island, near Squamish.

Stanley Park:

Chaythoos, near Prospect Point. See *Early Vancouver*, volumes 2 and 3.

Whoi-Whoi. In First Narrows; see *Early Vancouver*.