

Early Vancouver

Volume Five

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Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1936-1945.

Supplemental to volumes one, two, three and four collected in 1931, 1932 and 1934.

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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[photo annotation:]

Hastings Sawmill School, first school, 1873, whites and Indians. Mr. Palmer, teacher, on walk, June 11th 1886.

Think building was demolished as it was in the way of C.P.R. construction.

Alderman Peter Cordiner's cottage at rear on right.

This photo was taken Friday June 11th 1886—two days before Great Fire.

CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT VERNON PALMER, 2020 WEST 5TH AVENUE, VANCOUVER, BROTHER OF JOSEPH WILLIAM PALMER, THE LAST SCHOOL TEACHER AT THE HASTINGS SAWMILL SCHOOL, 1886, 28 MAY 1942.

J.W. PALMER. HASTINGS MILL SCHOOL, 1886.

Mr. Palmer said: "These two photographs are of my brother Joe; this one, by Brock and Co., was taken shortly after the Great Fire, 1886, and most likely by Harry Devine, pioneer photographer. My brother was born in the County of Middlesex, Ontario; he was seven years older than myself, and I am seventy-nine now. I was born same place, May 1st, 1863. Our parents were Francis McLearnth Palmer, who was born on a ship in the Indian Ocean; he was in the army, and at one time marched in the bodyguard of Queen Victoria. Mother was born in Suffolk, England, and her maiden name was Mary Jane Dark. There were four girls and six boys in the family, and I was the youngest boy. Father and Mother came to Canada in the early, early days, and took up a farm in the woods, or forest, of Middlesex. Father had a pension; I suppose army pension. Three boys, Robert, Joseph and Henry, came west to Vancouver and stayed; also Samuel; Francis, another brother, was here for a few days and went away to Marshfield down in Oregon. Lucy, my sister, and Emily, came to Vancouver; Lucy was Mrs. Adams Edwards when she came here; Emily was single, and married Capt. George Golightley, master mariner, ship *Duke of Argyle*, so that out of the ten children, five came to B.C. Mother and Father also came out, after they sold their farm and were aged. Father died first, about 1910, and is buried in Mountain View Cemetery; Mother went to Portland to live with brother Henry, and died there about ten years after. Of the five children, Joseph died back east, Lucy went to Victoria where she had a stationery business and died there, and Emily is still living in Seattle. She is the youngest of the family. We belonged to the First Baptist Church, Victoria, in early days.

"This other photograph by Smith of Detroit, Michigan, shows brother Joe with his bride on their wedding day. He went east to some place in the States, Maryland I think it was, and studied to be a medical doctor; he passed, and he practiced in Detroit, and he had a fine place; one of the best medical offices in Detroit. He married Miss" [blank] "and they had two children, two boys, I forget their names but one, I think, is a lawyer. I think they are in" [blank.]

R.V. PALMER CAME TO VANCOUVER BY HORSE AND FOOT.

"As for myself, I got here by C.P.R. part of the way, as far as Calgary. Then from Calgary we rode on flat cars loaded with steel rails, and navy jacks as far as the end of the track. At Calgary we, that is my brother Samuel and myself, boarded the flat cars at four o'clock in the morning; it was colder than Greenland; it was early 1885. I left Moosejaw when the red coats were going out from Moosejaw to Duck Lake to get Riel. Then we went right to Calgary by C.P.R., and on into the Rockies on the flat cars. We were boys, and out for fun, and were going to the 'Great Terminal' in the west of the Canadian Pacific Railway."

STONEY CREEK INDIANS.

"They let us off at Stoney Creek bridge, which was under construction, and then we packed our provisions and our blankets, and started off on foot towards the Columbia Valley and river. We came to a farm; we heard the geese squawking, so we got our guns ready and we made up our minds we would have a goose for dinner, but before we could get a shot they splashed the water, and away they went; they made an awful splash as they rose; they were wild geese."

C.P.R. A TOTE ROAD.

"The road that we travelled was part of a tote rode; the tote trail they toted the provisions in for the men through the mountains. The road was in some places good, but in others very muddy and wet; awfully hard work travelling for men carrying a heavy load; we had a great big buffalo robe, and a gun and a big Colts retriever, and a hatchet, and our loads were heavy."

SNOW SLIDES.

"After we had travelled several days going west, we began to hear the snow slides, the avalanches coming down, a continuous sort of thunder storm roar coming down every five or ten minutes; those snow slides coming down the mountain, and we were wondering when one was going to come down on top of

us. The mountain peaks were very high and covered with deep snow; one slide had come down a few weeks before we crossed, and there were five men under it. Their corpses were found, but the bears had eaten their heads off.”

REVELSTOKE, A LOG HUT HAMLET. GAMBLERS AND DESPERADOES.

“Then we got down to the Columbia River and stayed a day or so. The population there—I suppose that is Revelstoke now—was about two or three hundred, and of course miners and prospectors and a few stores, and one barber shop there. The loggers lived in huts built of logs, the huts were about sixteen foot square, and they played poker and blackjack, and had the money stacked up in the middle of the table, and sight-seeing around the logger’s huts, anyway huts or cabins or whatever you call them, they sat there and played blackjack and poker all day long, with the money stacked in the middle of the table, and never washed themselves, and hardly ever cut their hair, just sat in great big red and blue jackets, dirty, they looked like goats or something; just sat around all day playing blackjack.

“In one of these huts there was a round table filled with gamblers; they were playing for stakes and the money was heaped up in the centre of the table. They didn’t look as if they ever prospected; they looked as though they spent all their days gambling. There was a nigger in one of them, and he sat there—he looked as though he was the attendant—and his rifle was close beside him in the corner of the hut. It looked to me as though they were a gang of desperadoes there to shoot up travellers as they went through the mountains and take what they could from them.”

INDIAN PACK PONIES.

“Our packs got so heavy that we had to buy a couple of ponies from the Indians; that was at the same place; we paid twenty-five dollars each for the ponies; my brother bought the pack saddles; they wouldn’t cost much, perhaps five dollars for the two. We were ferried across the river, and then I told my brother Sam, ‘Now,’ I says, ‘those people are desperadoes, and they have that nigger with the rifle, and we shall have to watch out or that nigger will get us going through the trail in the mountains.’

“So we took our blankets and we packed two ponies, and an old miner come along used to packing, and he says, ‘Why, boys, you’ve never packed a pony before; now, take all the sack stuff off the ponies,’ and we took it off and he put the packs on right. And then he tightened up the cinch so tight I thought perhaps the pony would not be able to breathe or get along, but we found out it was all right, and the pony got along fine.”

HIGHWAY ROBBER.

“Well, so we had started on our way again. When we got out about a mile I said to my brother, ‘Now you watch on your side, and I’ll watch on my side.’ We were riding abreast. I was on the left. ‘We’ll be ready for that nigger, and be on our guard.’ A big fire had burnt out all one side, and there were big black logs and small trees here and there, lying on the ground, but covered with snow about a foot deep. So I saw my brother wasn’t watching very good on his side; anybody could get a level on him and shoot him, so I said to myself, ‘I’ll keep watch on both sides, for I know that nigger is there to get us.’ We had sixteen hundred dollars in cash on us. My brother had seven hundred and fifty sewed in his shirt, and I had seven hundred and fifty sewed in my shirt. We hadn’t gone very much further when I saw this nigger with his rifle behind one of those big rocks, and he had it trained on us; if we had gone another ten or fifteen feet he would have had the two of us in a line, and killed both of us with one bullet. When I saw him, he ducked behind a log, so I said to my brother, ‘He was going to get us; now we will get him.’ So my brother says, ‘No; we’re safe now; we’d better go on.’ If I had not seen him neither of us would have come through, and I should not be here today.

“Protection in the mountains was rare; there might have been one or two mounted police in the whole valley.”

C.P.R. A TOTE ROAD.

“Then we went up the west side of the Columbia River, and gradually ascended the range of mountains; the trail was very wet and muddy and as we ascended it got colder; there was very seldom a place to sleep; we came to a place where the trees had fallen across the tote road; we could not get our ponies through; we had to go away around in the bush to get our ponies through. So we sold the ponies for thirty

dollars apiece, and started out on foot again. I remember selling them, but who to, or where, I don't recall. It was so inconvenient with the ponies; you had to swim the rivers, and the trees were all blown across the tote road, and we had to go away around through the bush with the ponies; it was hard work. So we swam one river with them, but after that we sold them."

SHUSWAP LAKE.

"Well, then we got to the top of the range, and it was cold and no covering; we could not sleep; shivered all night. Then we came down to the Shuswap Valley; the Okanagan and the Thompson River. Oh, it took us days and days and days getting through there. We came to the Shuswap Lake, three or four small lakes; they had small scows, and we jumped aboard, and they had great big long paddles, and we rowed ourselves across the lakes.

"Finally we came down the Thompson River to Kamloops on a sternwheeler, and we heard the C.P.R. had let a contract to an American firm called the Onderdonk firm to build the C.P.R. track from the coast into the interior. So we made up our minds that when we came to the track coming in from the coast, we would take the track to Port Moody, which was then the C.P.R. terminal of the great continental railway. There was no thought of Vancouver being the terminal at that time."

ASHCROFT, B.C. PORT MOODY BOOMING. JOSEPH W. PALMER, 1885. LAST SCHOOLMASTER, HASTINGS MILL.

"Then we came into the cattle ranch district, and the half-breeds; whitemen had married squaws and had half-breed families about them, and we met the Semlins, the member of parliament, and he was married to an Indian woman, and we were talking to his sons; he was supposed to be one of the rich men up there in those days among the cattle men. Then after we came down the Thompson River, and caught up to where the Onderdonk railway was built, we took cabooses on the train to Port Moody; a little better at this end than flat cars; we got a caboose ride, and then we got into Hope. We landed in Port Moody, and met our brother Joseph there, who had come around by, I think, the Union Pacific, San Francisco, and boat up to Victoria. He had just landed in Victoria, and came over to Port Moody to meet us. He was not teaching then at Hastings Sawmill. We arrived at Port Moody early in the spring of 1885, not 1886, but spring of 1885. There was no town at Vancouver, but Port Moody was supposed to be booming; they were selling town lots and real estate men were there, but it was all woods and trees, but they were selling lots all the same, covered with trees."

PORT MOODY DISAPPOINTING. COAL HARBOUR.

"So when we saw the harbour we said, 'We're not going to stop; there's not going to be a big city here. There's no harbour; the harbour is too small; we won't invest our money here.' So we waited through the summer to see what future developments the C.P.R. would make. They started to build a wharf at Port Moody for the steamships to land their freight. But all of a sudden, they quit, and the rumour was spread that they were going to leave Port Moody and go to the harbour at Coal Harbour. But the real estate men and the big men at Port Moody, with investments there said, 'No. A ship can't anchor in Coal Harbour or Burrard Inlet; it would be blown ashore; it's too open; would be smashed up and wrecked.' So we procured a boat, and rowed twelve miles up the inlet to see for ourselves and we considered it a beautiful harbour, so we said, 'We'll not stay at Port Moody; we'll get out.' There was no place in 'Gastown' or Hastings Sawmill to start in business of any kind; it was too young. We went over to New Westminster which was quite a little town at that time, and started early in 1886 in New Westminster, and lived there. We were going into the teaming business."

HORSE AND TEAMS.

"By this time we heard that the C.P.R. had definitely decided to build their terminal at Burrard Inlet, so we made up our minds that we would be the first to get into 'Gastown'—with our teams. So we went up country to beyond Hope and got two teams of ranch horses, and had harness made in New Westminster for them. We came down river part on boat and part on trail. We waited in New Westminster until there was a better road to Gastown, and when the road was completed we drove our teams over, and started in business hauling lumber and slabs from the Hastings Sawmill."