

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

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MEMO OF CONVERSATION WITH MRS. MADELINE WILLIAMS, AGED INDIAN WOMAN, ALSO KNOWN AS "GASSY JACK'S WIFE," LIVING WITH HER GRANDDAUGHTER NITA WILLIAMS IN A SMALL COTTAGE AT THE WEST END OF THE INDIAN RESERVE, NORTH VANCOUVER, 13 JUNE 1940.

Entering the Indian Reserve by the long wooden path on stilts, which rambles over the former shore line before the front of the Indian village of Ustlawn, I encountered an old Indian man with one arm, and asked if he knew where Madeline lived; he shook his head. Finally I said, "Very old lady, with white head, Qwa-hail-yah." He exclaimed, interrogatively, "Gassy Jack's wife?" I replied, "Yes, yes," and he directed me to a small grey shack in cherry trees loaded with ripening fruit.

As I approached, an Indian man and Indian woman, both I should say in their twenties, were raising a ladder to pick cherries, and on enquiring if I could speak to Madeline, the young woman entered the rear door of a sadly dilapidated and untidy shack; hardly a cottage. She returned with an aged Indian woman; steel grey hair, light brown complexion, many wrinkles, and tottering gait. Her garments were old, the colour almost completely faded. Her hair was braided in two short tails down her back. I raised my hat and took a wrinkled hand in mine.

MRS. MADELINE WILLIAMS. QWA-HAIL-YAH. JOHN DEIGHTON. "GASSY JACK."

Major Matthews: Are you Madeline? Are you Qwa-hail-yah?

Mrs. Williams; (Giving my left arm just below the shoulder a gentle slap, and her eyes and countenance gleaming) "Yea—ah."

Major Matthews: May I come in and sit down?

We sat down; four of us. The whole habitation was a litter of household material, not one piece of which was of value; a number of rags hung on a line above a rusty stove; beside it a few sticks of wood. Two doors, opening to other "rooms," showed their contents to be nothing more than rubbish, though no doubt each piece was useful and serviceable to them. Outside the sun was shining; a profusion of red cherries mingled with the green of the leaves; the warm summer zephyr waved the branches; it was pleasant enough to the senses, but terribly poor, untidy, pleasant poverty. At an appropriate moment I slipped a fifty cent piece into her wrinkled hand.

It was difficult to converse and Mrs. Williams spoke in Indian, and addressed the others, rather than me, who interpreted it, and both were poor interpreters, but I gathered that the whitemans called her Madeline, but her Indian name was Qwa-hail-yah. She had had a son, Alfonse Williams, and the young woman was Nita, daughter of Alfonse and Mrs. Williams; the young man was Tommy Toman (whom I was afterwards told was married, but his wife had left him and gone to the United States.) Yes, Gassy Jack and she had had a baby; it lived about two years, died, and was buried at Paapeek (Brockton Point.) She remembered the first brass band on Burrard Inlet, the Indian band; the first bandmaster was Edwards, a half-breed. She had always worn her hair braided down her back; she had heard of Indian men having long hair, but ever since she could remember, Indian men had worn it short. She was about twelve years old when she married Gassy Jack; Gassy Jack's first wife had died; she remembered when no big steamboat came, no whites here, only one house. She talked much in Indian, but the young Indian woman, Nita, her granddaughter, was speechless, and almost motionless; the young Indian man, Tommy, was very slow, and a poor interpreter. No doubt the old lady was telling much of interest, but the young ones were listening themselves instead of passing it on to me. Presently I said I should like to buy some cherries, "two bits" worth, and they both went out to pick them. After they had gone, the old lady began to speak in broken English; I noticed she was almost toothless, and such teeth as did remain were brown of colour, and looked like snags rather than teeth.

She chatted: "No steamboat come; no white man; just one house; Gassy Jack came in big canoe"—and she waved her arm indicating from the direction of Port Moody up the Inlet—"then Gassy Jack go Westminster to run steamboat up to Port Yale" (she said "Port Yale") "and my aunt she go over to New Westminster and live there so when he come back to Westminster be there when he stopped his steamboat. Gassy Jack about your size" (five foot eight and a half); "nice good man; then he come

Gastown, make great big hotel" (and she waved her hand upwards); "after a while she sick, my aunt, Gassy Jack's wife, and she die; long time ago; I not stop long Gastown; be about twelve when I was Gassy Jack's wife; then Gassy Jack die, too, and I come over to here" (North Vancouver); "then come to my brother and my sister. Very poor now; no money, no clothes; cannot go to sell my baskets; can make good basket, but cannot go sell them; eyes getting blind."

By this time the two others had returned with the cherries. I tried my glasses on her eyes, but she did not seem to see any better. I asked if they had a photograph of her; they said, "Yes, up at Squamish." I asked if I may come again; they said, "Yes," and after handshakes all 'round, I departed.

It was a satisfactory visit only in that I had seen and conversed with the second wife of Gassy Jack, an old, worn and faded Indian woman of undoubted intelligence and character; gracious and kind, who in earlier years must have been of womanly strength, and, perhaps, prepossessing—I imagine so. It was an unusual visit inasmuch as in this year A.D. 1940, it was still possible to listen to the tongue, and touch the person, of a wife of John Deighton, alias "Gassy Jack" of Gastown, the historic whiteman to establish himself in Granville, now Vancouver.

J.S. Matthews.

MEMO OF CONVERSATION WITH MR. G.F. UPHAM, WHO VERY KINDLY CALLED AT THIS CITY ARCHIVES THIS AFTERNOON, 20 JUNE 1940, AS HE PROMISED ME HE WOULD DO SO YESTERDAY AFTERNOON AT THE VANCOUVER PIONEERS ASSOCIATION PICNIC, HELD IN STANLEY PARK YESTERDAY.

A.G. FERGUSON. FIRST FERGUSON BLOCK. THOS. DUNN, ALDERMAN. JAMES HARTNEY.

Mr. Upham said: "I know this. I came here January first, 1885; got off the stage from New Westminster—Douglas Road at the Granville Hotel; had a meal; fifty cents, and took a stroll to the corner. And at that time the Ferguson Block, on the southeast corner of Carrall Street and Powell Street, was up; a brand new building, and it is just possible the top floor was not finished at that time. Tom Dunn, hardware man, and Jim Hartney, had just moved in to the ground floor stores; the other stores in the building were empty at that time. Anyway, I know the building was up when I came on New Year's Day 1886. And the building next to it, next east, was being built soon after because I remember them building it. This photo, No. C.V. P. Dist. 8, N. 5" (Vancouver looking west from about corner of Westminster Avenue and Hastings Street) "was taken about the time I came; before or after."

F.W. HART, UNDERTAKER. QUEEN BROS. TEA SWAMP. FRASER AVENUE. MOUNTAIN VIEW CEMETERY.

"I remember one time I was pall bearer at a funeral, and there was a pool of water in the low spot at the foot of the hill by the Tea Swamp" (North Arm Road, Cemetery Road, Fraser Avenue) "and Frank Hart's hearse was supposed to keep on the corduroy road over the swamp, but it didn't; it got off the corduroy, and the horses couldn't pull it back on; the hearse was heavy. So we all had to get out and help them, and gracious, what a mess I was in when I got home. Frank Hart was the only undertaker at that time."

Note: the exact spot was 100-200 yards south on Fraser Avenue from the present Kingsway. JSM.

MEMO OF CONVERSATION WITH EX-ALDERMAN T.H. CALLAND, POINT GREY ROAD, COMING HOME IN THE STREET CAR THIS EVENING, 28 JUNE 1940.

JOHN LYNN. LYNN CREEK. D.L. 204. EDWARD MAHON.

Mr. Calland said: "I must tell you a queer real estate story. Edward Mahon" (Mahon, McFarland and Mahon) "went over by ferry, and walked over to see Mrs. Lynn, Lynn Creek. I went in and asked her how much she wanted for the property. She said, 'Sixty-five thousand dollars.' I told her I would go out and see the man who wanted to buy it and see if he would pay \$65,000. So I closed the door and went out.