

Early Vancouver

Volume Five

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

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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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Contact Information

City of Vancouver Archives
1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J9
604.736.8561
archives@vancouver.ca
vancouver.ca/archives



MEMO OF CONVERSATION WITH MRS. PHILLIP OBEN, CENTRAL PARK, VANCOUVER, WHO VERY KINDLY CALLED FOR A CHAT, CITY ARCHIVES, CITY HALL, 28 JULY 1937.

VANCOUVER WATERWORKS.

Mrs. Oben said: "I ought to be crying, instead of smiling; have just paid \$500 city taxes, and you know how it feels to do that," (laughingly) "and you know, we had a fire at Central Park, and our old picture house" (moving picture theatre) "burned down; no insurance."

J.J. NICKSON. J.W. MCFARLAND.

"It's a little unfair. J.W. McFarland, you know him, used to be secretary of the Vancouver Water Works when it started; he died the other day, and the newspapers give a story of how he built up the Capilano Waterworks system. The real credit should go to J.J. Nickson."

Note: I read to Mrs. Oben the following.

From *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 3, as being said by Mr. T.R. Nickson, son of J.J. Nickson:

R.M.S. ABYSSINIA.

"... but not long afterwards the steamer *Abyssinia* 'sat' on the pipe and there was a compound fracture; for one end of the pipe went west and the other went east ... in the interval Vancouver went around getting its water from horse-drawn wagons. When the pipe line had been repaired, Father put on a diver's suit, went down, and inspected it himself."

From *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 3, as being said by Mrs. Jane Nickson, widow of J.J. Nickson:

"The water pressure gauge was in our house, and I used to watch the gauge; a gauge like a steam gauge; if the pressure went down, the indicator needle went back. I saw the pressure had gone, and telephoned the water works. The people used to come to my house, too, for water. We had a big cistern made of wood and lined with lead or zinc; all my neighbours came to us for water."

From *B.C. Historical Quarterly*, July 1937, p. 159:

"In November" (1890) "the *Abyssinia* touched bottom in the Narrows, but a diver found her to be unharmed except for a slightly bent propeller. An amusing controversy followed as to whether or not she had struck the water main, which had been crushed mysteriously the day she sailed."

Mrs. Oben, continuing: "It's very amusing; is it?" (indignantly) "Well. They had an awful time putting the new pipes down in place of the broken ones.

"I remember that incident so well. J.J. Nickson, big stout man; they lived next door to us. Llewellyn was the diver, and they had to 'work the tides' right. Mr. Oben" (her husband) "could wake up at any time of the night he wanted to; that he decided on before he went to sleep, but Mr. Nickson could not; my husband used to assist him" (Mr. Nickson) "and Phillip would go over next door, and say, 'get up,' and then the two would go off, often two or three in the morning, and I would go over and stay with Mrs. Nickson, and then about 5 or 6" (a.m.) "the two of them would come back again; like drowned rats; it was awful wet that winter, and we" (Mrs. Nickson and Mrs. Oben) "would have dry clothes ready.

"They had an awful time repairing that break made by the *Abyssinia*. It wasn't very amusing; it was tragic. You see they had to get the pipes from England, and there was a lot of bother about the supply of pipes. It wasn't very amusing for the people of Vancouver who had to carry water from wells, or get it from carts. Suppose the city had got on fire, that wouldn't have been amusing if it had burned down again."

Major Matthews: Well, did the *Abyssinia* break the pipe?

Mrs. Oben: "I don't remember that it was ever *proved* that she did. But she was the biggest steamship. You cannot see under the water, under a steamer passing down the Narrows; something pretty big broke it; she was aground. What bent her propeller?"

Major Matthews: Is what Mrs. Nickson and Ralph (T.R. Nickson) said true.

Mrs. Oben: "Every word of it exactly; it's true." (emphatically)

COL. TRACEY, CITY ENGINEER.

Mrs. Oben: "The city" (of Vancouver) "served J.J. Nickson a dirty trick. After all that Mr. Nickson had done—after building the Capilano water system, all the trouble and difficulty he had; after putting it successfully under the Narrows, a difficult thing as it was the first time it had ever been done; after he had done so well—the city sent east for another man to take charge, Colonel Tracey, and put Mr. Nickson under him. Of course, Mr. Nickson would not stand for it and left at once; left the city's employ, but it was a shabby way to treat him."

(Note: Mr. Nickson afterwards became a successful contractor.)

ABYSSINIA'S ARRIVAL.

Mrs. Oben: "I don't recall exactly it if was the *Abyssinia* I saw come in; perhaps it was not, but it was daylight, and there was a crowd of people down to see her steam in; that great big policeman, chief Stewart, was down there, and the people wanted to go on the dock, but he would not let them, so we stood on the cliff and watched from the foot of Granville Street, on Cordova Street. The reason he would not let them on the wharf was not on account of the crowd; there wasn't so many as that, but because the wharf was rickety."

Note: the first wharf, built, if memory serves, by the San Francisco Bridge Co. (as both were) fell down, or a portion of it did. The sandstone at "Puchahls," i.e., "white rocks" in the Indian tongue, was the cause; the piles had not penetrated properly, and during construction, a portion of the wharf "fell down," according to old timers, which probably means that it got out of true perpendicular owing to high tide, or something.

J.S. Matthews.

BRIG.-GEN. VICTOR W. ODLUM, C. B., C.M.G., D.S.O. ("COME BOYS, DON'T SAY ODLUM, CALL ME GENERAL.")

"He was a man with so firm a jaw that, once he had shut it, he couldn't open it himself. We are not likely to forget the 'rum' incident of 1916."

J.S. Matthews.

COLONEL W.W. FOSTER, D.S.O.

A short history of Col. Foster, by J.S. Matthews—"Foster fosters Foster's."

Gen. Odlum: (to Major Matthews) "Why wasn't Foster a success as O.C." (Officer commanding, the British Columbia Regiment, D.C.O.R.)

Major Matthews: Too cold (austere).

As a sergeant in the old militia unit, No. 6, Co. B.C.B.G.A. and later in its successor, the 6th D.C.O.R., Sergeant Foster was not popular; he shirked the work, but always turned up, smart and shining, for a ceremonial parade; he was smart; he was in the militia but not of it. He found his true level in 1935 when he was appointed Chief of Police. Honourable enough for an officer, but imagine Col. Worsnop, Col. McHarg, or Major Tite, accepting such a post. Worsnop's red face would have blushed redder; he would have exploded at the mere suggestion of his name; McHarg would have guffawed, long and loud, and Tite would have merely looked at you, and turned away; the severest rebuke of all.

J.S. Matthews.