

Early Vancouver

Volume Seven

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

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1956)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected between 1931-1956.

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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10 JANUARY 1953.

THE SHERLOCK HOLMES OF OUR ARCHIVES.

It takes plenty of sleuthing to uncover historic records.

By Cy Young.

Each October 21 Major J.S. Matthews, City Archivist, presents his friend and former batman, Albert E. Taylor with a pipe. So far he has presented Taylor with no less than thirty-six of them—annual tokens of appreciation of the fact that the ex-batman generously bestowed his own precious briar upon the Major when the latter lost his pipe in a muddy trench in France on October 21, 1916.

The sentimental pipe-giving ritual is typical of Major Matthews whose preoccupation with events of historical significance made it possible for him to amass, despite almost insurmountable difficulties, the veritable treasure trove of historical data, photographs, maps, manuscripts, records and relics which make up the City Archives.

Romantic Past

Thousands of visitors are shown through the Archives on the ninth floor of the City Hall, every year. They view a variety of civic relics ranging from wrought-iron ankle chains, worn by early Vancouver "chain-gangs" while on outdoor work parties, to such items as a watch that came through the "Great Fire" of 1886; and a cannon ball, dug up from P.C. Hardy's garden on West Fortieth, which was believed to have been shot from H.M.S. *Zealous*, the last of the British navy wooden flagships.

Archives' visitors include clerks accountants, school teachers, journalists, and even, occasionally, a celebrity like Mrs. William Van Duren of Jefferson, Oregon, better known as "Klondike Kate."

Major Matthews and his full-time assistant, Mrs. Jean Gibbs, former Point Grey School teacher, also are called upon to answer queries by the thousands from telephone callers seeking to satisfy their curiosity on such points as which hen laid the first egg in Vancouver—or the color of eyes, hair and complexion of Vancouver's first mayor, Malcolm MacLean.

There are more than 7000 docketts in the Archives on subjects pertaining to the City of Vancouver and all are welcome to make use of this store-house of information. It's one of the most active departments of the City and Major Matthews does his best to dispel the illusion held in some quarters that an archivist is an "old fossil."

Visitors who happen to be in the Archives in mid-afternoon may be invited to share tea with "The Major" and Mrs. Gibbs, in the "inner sanctum" at Major Matthews' large desk. Others are less fortunate, like the young man who entered the Archives one day and asked to see the "murder weapons." He was sent packing promptly, to the Police Station. Said the Major: "The Archives department is not Waxworks. We keep records of those who build—not those who destroy."

Old Newspapers

Major Matthews has collected what he considers to be the finest collection of Old Vancouver newspapers in the world, including copies of the first newspaper on Burrard Inlet, the *Moodyville Tickler*. He has built up a picture file of no less than 8000 photographs, all of historic significance; and has interviewed hundreds of civic pioneers, recording their reminiscences for posterity.

Once described as a "combined amateur detective, windmill tilter and evangelist," Major Matthews spares no effort to add to the Archives' collection. The department is operated on a limited budget and often the money for a precious relic, or rare photograph, comes from the Major's own pocket.

Saved From Fire

Once he actually saved some early military records of B.C. from the very jaws of the furnace in the dead of night, an act which he admits, with a chuckle, qualifies him for the title of the “greatest burglar out of jail in B.C.”

Major heard that an old soldier and caretaker of a military building had been ordered to destroy the documents in the furnace. The Major was barely in time to save the precious records which now repose safely in the City Archives.

Collecting lore for the City Archives is truly a labor of love for the Major, and the City Council and others have found on occasion, that he is a very jut-jawed gentleman indeed, when it comes to safe-guarding the city’s heritage.

Apathy and a penurious attitude by many former officials made the Major’s self-imposed task of establishing the City Archives particularly difficult. In some cases he met out-and-out opposition. The late Mayor Gerry McGeer, for example, opposed expenditures for the Archives on the grounds that the invaluable historic collection was just a “bunch of junk.”

Matthews, born in Wales and schooled in England, first became interested in the preservation of the historic records of Vancouver soon after his arrival here in November, 1898, from New Zealand, where he attended university.

Except for the period during World War One when he saw distinguished service overseas and was wounded, Matthews remained in Vancouver where his collecting of relics and old civic records became a serious hobby.

By 1929 this hobby had grown to a full-time job, working from his home. In 1931 the Public Library granted him the use of the attic of the old City Hall, on Main Street.

There was no heat, light or water in the attic room which the Major has since described as “the dirtiest room in British Columbia.”

In 1933, under the regime of Mayor L.D. Taylor, Matthews received official recognition and the title of City Archivist. He was given an honorarium of \$25 a month—from which he was generously allowed to pay his own expenses—and permitted to move his Archives to a tiny room on the tenth floor.

Growing Importance

The importance of the department has been gradually recognized by successive Councils to the extent that the Archives now have considerably larger quarters on the ninth floor of the City Hall and an appropriation of \$12,000 annually. Major Matthews now receives a salary of \$300 monthly. Some day, the Major hopes, Vancouver’s Archives will boast a bigger staff and more adequate quarters where treasured relics and records of the city’s past may be properly stored and displayed.