

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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Wah Chong, Granville, Burrard Inlet, 1884.

This pioneer family of Burrard Inlet lived on the south side of Water St midway between Abbott and Carrall Sts. At the back of this dwelling was a forest clearing, twenty acres in extent, and enclosed along Cambie, Hastings and Carrall streets by a line of tall forest trees. The fourth side was a muddy beach. The clearing behind was a tangle of blackberry vines, skunk cabbage, and impassable forest debris intersected by one or two narrow paths. At night deer passed to and fro across this sidewalk upon which the Chong family are seated. This building is shown in the well known photo "Granville, B.I." circa 1884, and under the number "I". see "Early Vancouver", Matthews, Vol. 5, frontispiece. It is whitewashed with lime. Also see pages 4A, 7, 13 and 133. Jennie Wah Chong was the first Oriental to attend school. see "Early Vancouver", Vol. 4, p. 138. The two men wear pigtails, but they are not visible. See photo Dist. N. 6, P. 76. Before this the fine old Chinaman had a laundry at Hastings Townsite, i.e., "the end of the road". It would seem that about 1884, probably August, a photographer visited Granville and took the several well known photographs.

City Archives, J.S.M.

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[photo annotation:]

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City Archives. J.S.M.

CHINESE THEATRE, CHINATOWN.

My first visit to the Chinese Theatre in Chinatown, Vancouver, was in the winter of 1898.

Precisely how we got to it I cannot tell. We turned off Hastings Street and went south on Carrall Street. Then, at some point, we turned into an alley between old wooden buildings. There were no lights. It was pitch dark and raining. The wooden planks on which we walked were wet. None of the nearby buildings were painted and appeared as black silhouettes. We turned one or two corners upon which, above our heads three or five feet, a single eight candle power electric carbon bulb glowed in the encircling gloom. Where we were going I did not know, but my guide kept on going—I followed. We passed shadows of men going out—some overtook us going in. There was nothing startling, nothing to be alarmed at. It was simply a poorly lighted entrance. One might compare it with going with a lantern to the woodshed or the barn.

We paid a small entrance fee—ten cents, or perhaps as high as a quarter, certainly no more. Inside we climbed an equally ill lighted stairway of wood, carpetless, unpainted, and in the gloom seemingly begrimed with tobacco smoke. We found ourselves in a balcony overlooking the "pit" below, and the stage beyond. In the balcony we sat on backless benches. Drably dressed Chinamen were sitting, loosely grouped, on every bench. It was not crowded and every now and again one would come in and one would go out. There seemed no special moment of entrance or departure. All wore their pigtaails. All wore dark collarless coats fastened with knots, not buttons. Below, in the pit, were a similarly conducted audience, not by any means crowded. It seemed that the Chinese theatre-goers came and went as they wished. There were no ushers—the audience merely stayed and departed at their own will.

The stage was oblong as all stages. A number of actors were walking about it, others were sitting. Some musicians were beating or banging instruments we did not recognise. Some seemed to be brass pans; others, wooden pillars on which the musicians beat with sticks. It was an "awful racket." I asked my Chinese guide if he liked Chinese music or European music best, and he replied that he liked one as well as the other—it was what one was accustomed to. We watched the actors in their coloured (looked like silk) gowns strut about, and, to our ears, jabber their lines. What the play was about we did not know. Actors came in, others went out, and the chatter sounded like endless gobble-gobble-gobble. After an hour or more, the play apparently proceeding as merrily as ever, we left quietly. We were told the play would go on for months—the same play. The Chinese audiences seemed deeply interested and attentive, but to those accustomed to the Vancouver Opera House, it was about as gloomy, ill-lighted, and dreary a den as could be imagined.

The old theatre was destroyed by fire 29 November 1947. It had long fallen into disuse.

J.S. Matthews

4 December 1947.