

**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 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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Sliding door, barn red, warehouse brick. Tank barn red. Filling tank scarlet, 13 imp gal. Kitchen tank, 10 ft garden hose. Black auto. Brass lamps & mountings.



THE PIONEER GASOLINE STATION OF CANADA.  
(probably of the world)  
Vancouver, British Columbia.

Painted May 1933 from sketch, page 307 "EARLY VANCOUVER" Vol. 2. Major J. S. Matthews in City Archives, Vancouver, who owns painting.

Created by The Imperial Oil Company Limited, summer 1908, south east corner Cambie & Smythe Sts. C.V. TRANS N 3 P3

Corrugated iron shed. J. C. Rollston, first attendant with garden hose filling pipe - no nozzle

Item # EarlyVan\_v7\_037

*[illustration annotation:]*

The pioneer gasoline station of Canada.

(probably of the world)

Vancouver, British Columbia.

Perspective Drawing by John Innes

Erected by the Imperial Oil Company Limited. S.W. Corner Cambie and Smythe Sts. Vancouver, summer of 1908. Copyright J.S.M.

Corrugated iron shed. J.C. Rollston, first attendant with garden hose filling pipe, no nozzle.

Painted May 1933 from sketch, page 307 *[of original volume]*, "EARLY VANCOUVER" Vol. 2. Major J.S. Matthews in City Archives, Vancouver, who owns painting.

Erected by the Imperial Oil Company Limited, summer 1908, south east corner Cambie & Smythe Sts.

## FIRST GASOLINE SERVICE STATION IN AMERICA.

18<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1947.

Dear Mr. Westover:

I have your letter and the "CONSTRUCTION WORLD," Aug. 1947 in which, page 28, there appears

### "SUPERSERVICE STATION MONUMENT TO WORLD'S FIRST IN SEATTLE"

with illustrations and narrative, in part, "opened for business on the site of the world's first 'filling station,' built by the Standard Oil Co., just 40 years ago." And then you go on to say that you have always been under the impression the Imperial Oil Co., Limited tank on Smythe St. was the first, and would like to have my comments.

My comment would be that "It's just those Americans again," and my thoughts are that so long as it is mere Americans no harm will befall us. No better neighbors to Canada could exist, and if they like to believe themselves first in peace and first in war, let them. Every nation has its weakness. Theirs is that without their morning shock, life in the United States would not be bearable. British and Canadians prefer the beer—Uncle Sam prefers the froth on it.

We had been selling Atlantic Red oil and Renown Engine oil to the Hastings Sawmill for years—selling direct, and when Mr. Hendry, the manager, got what was called, in those days, an "automobile"—no motor cars then—his storekeeper called me on the phone and asked if we had the kind of gasoline good for automobiles. I reply "Yes." We had "74 degree." We had "D.S. Gasoline," and we had "benzine," which was used for lacquering salmon cans at the canneries. He asked which was the best and I replied "74," so he said send a couple of five-gallon cans of that. I shall never forget because I was alone, young, and no-one to consult, but I had read of automobiles in the monthly magazines.

Soon Mr. Hendry's car tires got into trouble, so he took his car to the bicycle shop on Hastings near Columbia Ave. There he got some gasoline and some lubricating oil, but their price was plus their profit, and Mr. Hendry and his purchasing agent were aghast when the account came in.

The next time I called at the bicycle shop I was received with shouts, but not of applause. In the meantime another pioneer repair man had started on Granville St. near Smythe, and soon I was in trouble with him, too. I tried to be "nice," but the Imperial Oil, in their opinions, were a "rotten" firm—they sold gasoline and lubricating oil direct to the user. Things got bad. New motor cars were coming in. The motorists were "kicking" at the price of gasoline, which was sold to the dealer in iron drums for twenty cents a gallon, and retailed at forty cents, until the Granville St. man cut the price and affixed a great cotton banner across his store façade reading "GASOLINE 35¢"; a profit of fifteen cents for taking the gasoline out of the iron drum and putting it in the motor car tank.

Next, the garage men began to condemn our lubricating oil. No matter what went wrong—even if a tire bust—it was caused by the poor "Imperial" Oil. We could not sell our lubricating oil. Though we bought gasoline from Whiting, Ind., after digging it out of the well, refining it, transporting it, delivering it, and making a profit, all for twenty cents, and the garage man got fifteen cents for drawing it out of a faucet, there was nothing we could do which was good. We were a very very bad lot. Nobody loved us. So one day, in despair, I asked Mr. Rolston, the manager, to come with me to the Granville Street place and he did. We had no sooner got inside than Mr. Rolston was "attacked." He waited a moment or so until the barrage was over and then bolted, with me after him. We walked back down Smithe Street and we passed the Pioneer Laundry. He and I were silent in thought. Suddenly I blurted out, "Well, can I do it?" He replied, "Yes." I asked "When?" His reply was "When you like."

Next morning, passing the present Victory Square, I saw an open motor car chugging uphill, hailed him, jumped up and sat, out in the open, in the front seat. I told the driver that he could get gasoline down at the plant for twenty cents. He was amazed—said he would be down that afternoon. I got out and walked down to Smithe St. warehouse and was astonished to see him there before me. Bud Mulligan, the foreman, came out of the yard and yelled at me “Did you tell this fellow he could get gasoline here?” My reply was “Yes, the boss said so.” So Bud filled five or ten gallons, as best he could with a wide-lipped five gallon pail and a huge funnel, into the vent in the tank under the front seat after first removing the seat. There was some slop as a rule. The heavy five-gallon pail, the huge funnel and the small opening of the tank were not conducive of precise pouring. And the slop was dangerous. Presently “the news” spread and soon every motor car in town was down (there were only a few—ten or twelve), drove into the yard, blocked the loading platform for the “low-hung” trucks, frightened the horses and generally made a nuisance of themselves. “Bud” Mulligan swore and took the law in his own hands. He closed the wide wooden double gates, and, with a marking brush on a box lid, painted “Automobiles filled in the street,” affixed it to one half gate, and locked both together. This had the disadvantage that the men had to carry two heavy five-gallon pails of gasoline all through the warehouse, up the yard and out into the street, and there was a question of measurement when the motor car tanks could not take all in the pail.

“Bud,” to save his men work, then ran a pipe out to the wooden fence along the street, just where your front door is now (East of Cambie St. on Smithe), connected it with the bulk storage tank and put a valve on the end, and for a day or two, pails were filled from the end of the pipe projecting through the fence. But we soon saw that would not do.

At that time Shaughnessy, Kitsilano, east Grandview, was still standing forest, and, in the proximity of Cambie and Smithe street were many residences and children—one of them might interfere with the valve, which, though locked, might be twisted off. Then we (it was mostly Bud) got the Italian pipefitter to make a corrugated iron protection and put it over the valve on the end of the pipe. But, while “Monty” was doing that the idea of a kitchen tank was conceived. “Monty” was handy with tools and before long he had a kitchen tank on top of the board fence. That lasted a day or two until the “boss,” Mr. Rolston, came along and wouldn’t “stand for it.” He must have told Mr. Mulligan to build a small shelter, with an open sliding door on the street, put the tank on a concrete pillar, and at night lock the sliding door and in the morning open it.

J.C. Rollston (not Rolston) was uncle to C.M. Rolston, manager, and was nightwatchman. He was not well—was very pale. We decided he must have sunshine. So we took him off the night watchman’s job and put him in what was now elevated to the dignity of “The Filler.” I got him an old chair. Mrs. Matthews made him a cushion, and he sat all morning in the sun, with the board sidewalk at his feet, the hay growing in the gutter of macadamed Smithe street waiting for the automobile which never came. I have passed and he would remark, with much gratification, “I’ve had two this morning.” The automobile drove up, with its Presto-lite tank on the running board, remove the front seat, and Mr. Rollston would seize the end of his garden hose. The glass gauge of the thirteen-gallon kitchen tank would show the gasoline mark slowly falling. There would be a shout “Shut her off,” and then Mr. J.C. Rollston would drain what was left in the garden hose into the motor tank by squeezing the hose between his thumb and finger. He was most punctilious that the motorist got the last drop.

All went well until motor cars got more numerous and there came the first holiday, May 24<sup>th</sup> or July 1<sup>st</sup>, when there was a rush of the few there were. Mr. Rollston was slow and the motorists in a hurry. Some caustic remarks were made, usually something most uncomplimentary to the “damned monopoly.” At the time the Union Oil had not arrived. The Imperial was the only source for gasoline.

The California oil wells were coming in and it was not long before agents for automobiles, abetted by the garage men, interviewed other oil producers in the south. The first opposition wormed its way into favor with the garage men by giving the garage one cent commission on sales. Then when a second oil firm arrived they repeated the formula by offering two cents. When the third came another cent was added to the price, and each time the consumer was “soaked.”

Every time a new gasoline competitor arrived the consumer paid another cent, which cent went to the garage man until it finally grew into five cents.

When filling stations first operated they filled gasoline only. In 1918 there were only about four or five—Columbia St., Cambie and Smithe, Seventh and Main, Broadway and Granville. Later there was a small one at 12<sup>th</sup> at Granville, and had that method of delivery of gasoline to motorists remained those persons would not now be paying, indirectly, the cost of garage handling.

But, to return to the “CONSTRUCTION WORLD,” no one knows, nor will they ever know, whether Seattle or Vancouver was first. I am a principal in the inauguration of bulk gasoline delivery in Vancouver. It grew out of my suggestion as we passed the Pioneer Laundry. What day that was I do not know (nor even the month) save that it was summer. I, at least, knew nothing of Seattle’s doings—never heard of their early tank until ten years ago. So far as Vancouver was concerned we were spontaneous. When the directors from Sarnia came out they were told, walked out to look at the curiosity, paraded around it, made some remarks, and went back to our office in the Loo Building, Hastings and Abbott St. We got letters from all over the United States asking how we “ran it.” I distinctly recall one from Florida.

My personal belief is that Vancouver had the first “filling station” for motor cars, but I have heard that Seattle did have a garden hose pipe hanging over the edge of their dock, that is the Standard Oil Co. (John MacLean, or McLean, manager), Seattle, and that they filled gasoline launches that way before Vancouver did, and it is quite reasonable because we hadn’t any dock.

I can, of my own knowledge and for historical purposes, declare on oath if need be, that the Smithe street filling station of the Imperial Oil Co., Limited was an original idea conceived on the ground and grew by progressive stages to a kitchen tank, thirteen imperial gallons, glass gauge fitted by “Monty,” the Italian pipe-fitter; painted red, on a concrete pedestal; in a corrugated iron shelter about 10’ x 4’ x 6’; with sliding door 10’; the outside painted red; no sign save “NO SMOKING” on the door; a wood plank sidewalk; hay and grass in the gutter. And so continued for about two or more years, when a second tank was put up—then three, four and five—until finally dismantled some time after the war ended in 1918.

A painting of this garage, by John Innes, the celebrated Canadian scenic painter, is in this City Archives. The original tank on a false pedestal of wood (the original concrete one having been lost somehow) is now on the 9<sup>th</sup> Floor, City Hall, unchanged save that, originally, it had a globe valve whereas that type was soon changed to a Lukenheimer vale.

My further comment is that, after so many years, it is rather late for Seattle to now claim priority. However, it’s “Only those Americans, again. Let them take joy out of it.”

With best wishes

Most sincerely,

J.S. Matthews  
CITY ARCHIVIST

G. Westover, Esq.,  
Imperial Oil Limited,  
Vancouver.



Hastings & Cambie Sts, summer 1896. The centre of Vancouver. On the left, out of sight, the Court House, before which, in Sept. 1901, a brilliant welcome was accorded T.R.H. The Duke & Duchess of Cornwall and York, afterwards King George and Queen Mary. Here, in the centre of the street, in the spring of 1900, we celebrated the Relief of Trafalgar, with a huge bonfire which burned a great hole in the new wood block pavement. No street cars east of here; all street cars turn down Cambie St to Cordova street, the principal retail shopping street. On left, Inns of Court Building, where, at the corner of Hamilton & Hastings streets, L.A. Hamilton drove a stake, and commenced to survey the forest into streets and blocks. The first office of the "Imperial Bank of Canada" was on this corner. Buildings in the distance include O'Brien's Hall, Post office; the Pacific Business College was the first commercial school. On the corner, a wooden building is the famed "Arcade", with thirteen small shops, cutting through corner from Hastings to Cambie St. The first office of the "Great Northern Railway" is on the corner—behind the street car. Street car fares, five cents; no tickets. The "Arcade" was built about Dec. 1895, "meet you in the Arcade" was a common expression. Wood plank side walk; think street was macadam, replaced, 1900, with wood blks. Left hand "rule of the road". No traffic lights; jay walking permitted; the word not known. Two oxen, yoked, passing. Dog resting in middle of street. Electric arc light street lights, attended to daily by man in buggy. Eleven cross arms on telephone poles. Photo presented Jan. 1954, by W. B. Wellwood, Victoria, son of second lighthouse keeper at Pt Atkinson. City Archives P.5.m. see photo Str. N. 115, P. 184 Four wheels only on street; open platform both ends; unheated; seats lengthwise

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