

Early Vancouver

Volume Seven

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

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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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Contact Information

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



GENERAL SIR ARTHUR CURRIE AT LADYSMITH.

AUGUST 1913. SUPPRESSION OF CIVIL DISORDER.

This is a story I have never seen in print and, though I submitted it to Col. Urquhart, who wrote the life of my friend Colonel Currie, of Victoria, he did not use it.

In August 1913 the coal miners, agitated by American unionists, went on strike at Ladysmith, Nanaimo, Union Bay and Cumberland. The Provincial Police were sent to Nanaimo by steamer but, on attempting to disembark, the miners would not allow them and some of the constables were thrown off the wharf into the sea. The volunteer militia of Vancouver, Victoria and New Westminster were called out, hurriedly. Those from the mainland went by boat and landed, if I recall aright, at Departure Bay and marched into Nanaimo. Others from Vancouver were sent to Union Bay and Cumberland. The Victoria militia was sent to Ladysmith where some of the houses of the coal company had been burned by the rioters. Also, the women were very nasty, and stealthily approaching the soldiers sleeping—it was warm—on the wooden sidewalk, kicked at them. It was a disagreeable situation.

The militia of the mainland was, at first, the 6th D.C.O.R., the Seaforths and the Irish Fusiliers. Those from Victoria were the 88th, and I think some of the 5th Regiment Canadian Garrison Artillery. I think there must have been some from the 50th Highlanders, because Col. Currie had ended his command of the 5th C.G.A., and had raised the kilted regiment known as the 50th. It was very inconvenient to all militiamen to be called out for riot duty. They were of all professions and trades—clerks, carpenters, street-car conductors, and it was not pleasant to have to drop one's work on a moment's notice, get into uniform and rush out of town without knowing when one would be back. However, it was done and done well. At Ladysmith, just above the E. & N. Railway station, was the Abbotsford Hotel where the soldiers were lodged.

One morning, immediately after arrival at Ladysmith, Colonel Currie drew up his command in line on the middle of the street in front of the Abbotsford Hotel. The street was dry and dusty. He had a small command—not more than 50 or 100, in uniform of course, and with their rifles and sidearms.

Colonel Currie stood out in front waiting for the parade to draw up in proper order and the inhabitants of Ladysmith soon saw what was going on. Men, women and children gathered to look. They were tolerably well behaved, were interested in the display and the uniforms, and there were few "cat calls." There was quite a small crowd of them, though large for Ladysmith. Word had soon spread and the crowd gathered.

Colonel Currie turned from his men and faced the crowd. Then he addressed them something like this:

"We are very sorry to have to come here. We are volunteer soldiers who have had to leave our homes and our offices, and it is putting us to much inconvenience as we do not know when we shall be able to go back to our homes. However, we have been sent here to keep order. We hope for the least possible trouble. We shall not trouble you if we can help it. But, we are here to keep order and" (sternly) "*we intend to do it.*"

Turning around, he commanded in a loud voice:

"With five rounds ball, load."

In an instant the rifle bolts were going clickity, clickity, clickity, as five rounds ball were loaded from the magazines. Then there was a loud explosion. Someone, either accidentally or by previous order (quite likely the latter and by Currie's instructions) had pressed the trigger on his rifle.

Before one could say "Jack Robinson" the crowd had dispersed. They took to their heels in one grand rush. They were gone.

J.S. Matthews.

October, 1952.