

**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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*[photo annotation:*

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 Mafeking, 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 J.S.M. See photo Str. N. 115, P. 184. Four wheels only on street; open platform both ends; unheated; seats lengthwise.

## **IMPERIAL OIL LIMITED.**

Unveiling of bronze memorial plaque to mark the site where stood the first gasoline filling station for automobiles in Canada, at southeast corner of Cambie and Smithe streets, Vancouver, Thursday, 8 September 1955 at 10:00 a.m.

Major Matthews, City Archivist:

In 1898 The Imperial Oil Company had a small office on Cordova Street, and an old railway construction shed beside the tracks near Heatley Avenue for a warehouse. The British Columbia Oil Company was here, behind us, a brick warehouse and one storage tank for coal oil—the only storage tank in all British Columbia.

About the last day of the year 1898 a telephone message came to our office from the British Columbia Oil saying they had just received a telegram instructing them to check our stock. We were still in a state of amazement when a telegram from our own headquarters in Winnipeg came instructing us to check theirs. The British Columbia Oil Company ceased and the Imperial office on Cordova Street was moved here. In 1899 the Imperial Oil in British Columbia had an office staff of two, the manager, Mr. Averill, and his general attorney, that was me, a young clerk, for when anything was wanted it was "James, come here," or "James, go there." I typed his letters, answered the telephone, made out the invoices, kept the stock book, acted as cashier, swept the office and cleaned the ashes out of the stove. Mr. C.M. Rolston was our only salesman.

Cambie Street was a country road with a crop of hay in both gutters, and so was Smithe Street. Small trees covered the land as far as the Larwill Bus Station in one direction, and the C.P.R. Roundhouse on Drake Street in the other. The shore of False Creek, since filled in to make the railway yards, was close, it was just behind.

Some years after a telephone call from the Hastings Sawmill asked if we had any gasoline suitable for automobile use. I explained that we had four gallon cans only and of three kinds. Benzine used by salmon cannery for cutting their lacquer; another called deodorised stove used by plumbers in their fire pots, and a third called 74 sold to dry cleaners. The first gasoline ever sold to an automobile owner in British Columbia was a four gallon can of 74 Baume. Later they phoned again, asking if we had any automobile oil. I was alone in the office—had no one to consult—had never seen an automobile but had read of them in magazines. So I went into the warehouse and said, "Bud, take the label off a can of Atlantic Red and stencil it 'Automobile Oil.'" That was the first four gallons of automobile oil ever sold in this province.

Automobiles were increasing—there were five or six of them in Vancouver. Wood barrels were a failure and would not hold so volatile a liquid as gasoline. They arrived half empty, so we were delighted when a box car of fifty-six steel barrels, a new invention, arrived. Soon after a small horizontal storage tank was erected—the second storage tank for petroleum products in all B.C.—and after that our gasoline arrived in tank cars from Whiting, Indiana. The first automobile repairs were done at a bicycle shop on Hastings Street near Columbia. Then a second one was started on Granville Street, where the Vogue Theatre is now. It was a mere shed with an open front end, and at the back, a steel barrel with a tap lay on its side and the gasoline drawn off into a bucket as beer is into a jug.

The Imperial was the only firm in British Columbia which sold gasoline, and we sold for twenty cents. The garage sold for thirty-five, a nice profit for turning a tap, and we protested. The garageman retaliated by disparaging our motor oils, and the fight was on, long and bitter. According to them our Zeroline, now Polarine, would score your cylinder walls, break the piston rings, crack your crank shaft. It was so vile an oil it would even affect your personal reputation. One man said to me, “You’ve got the mon-o-po-ly,” and when I queried, “What’s that?” he repeated it. Thank goodness you no longer suffer from the mon-o-po-ly. My efforts were hopeless—I could not sell our automobile oil, and finally Mr. Rolston decided to come and see for himself.

A torrent of abuse assailed us as we entered Leicester’s humble garage on Granville Street. Mr. Rolston listened calmly, turned on his heel, and I followed. Not a word was spoken.

We walked, silently, side by side, down this street, Smithe Street, until after a couple of blocks and as we passed the Pioneer Laundry I ventured to ask, “What shall I do?” Mr. Rolston replied, “Start.” I said, “When?” and he said, “Now.” That was how the first gasoline service station in Canada began.

Next morning I stood on the curb in front of the old Court House, now Victory Square. An open top automobile came chugging up Hastings Street towards me. I hailed it and jumped into the empty seat beside the driver. I told him he could get gasoline at the warehouse for twenty cents—quite a reduction from thirty-five—and he replied, “I’ll be down this afternoon.” I got out and started to walk, but when I entered the gate, which stood just here on my right, to the warehouse yard, he was there before me. Bud, the foreman, splendid man who had walked over the Rockies when the C.P.R. was built, roared at me, “Say, did you tell this man ...” and I answered, “Yes—the Boss said so.”

The news soon spread. Automobiles drove into the yard and got mixed with the horses. Bud closed the gate, and put up a sign, “Automobiles filled in the street.”

It was hard work carrying two five-gallon pails and a big funnel to the middle of the street every time a motor car came, so Bud got the idea of a half inch pipe to the wooden street fence, and with a valve on the end. It was a little dangerous, and was an expedient which lasted a few days only. Our nightwatchman, Mr. J.C. Rollston (spelt with two Ls), uncle to the manager, was ill—his face pale and wan—so the idea of building a little corrugated iron shelter, about ten feet wide and five feet deep, was conceived, and putting Mr. Rollston in charge—the first service station attendant in this Dominion. Monte, the mechanic made a concrete base and set this thirteen gallon kitchen hot water tank on top, and fitted a length of rubber garden hose. I found a bar-room chair and my wife made a cushion for Mr. Rollston to sit upon.

The fresh air and the sunshine soon banished the pallor from his cheeks, and, oftentimes as I passed and waved, “Good morning,” he would answer, “I’ve been busy this morning.” “How many?” I would call and he would answer back, “Three this morning.” Three, in all British Columbia!

I am proud of what you have done today, and my old associates would be proud. There were five of us. Mr. Rolston who authorised it; myself, your first clerk, who suggested it; Bud Mulligan, your first foreman, who supervised; Monte, your first mechanic, who built it; and Mr. J.C. Rollston, your first service station attendant. Alas, save myself, all gone, but I can feel their presence, and I

hope you can, standing here beside me all in a row, watching you and smiling in the warmth of their pleasure and pride in the tribute you are paying them—proud of you as their successors. It is a little wondrous that, half a century later, and upon the exact spot, your corporation, the Imperial Oil Limited, now grown great, deigns to mark with a bronze memorial the site of their first feeble effort.

Note: owing to temporary indisposition, the above speech was not delivered by Major Matthews in person, but was tape recorded so efficiently as not to reveal his absence. In his stead, Alderman George T. Cunningham removed the Union Jack, unveiled the plaque, and made a short eloquent speech.

**[LETTER FROM JACK BIRT.]**

IMPERIAL OIL LIMITED

718 Granville Street  
Vancouver, British Columbia.

J.C. Birt      Room  
Field Representative

Birks

s 720-721  
Building

September 13, 1955.

Major J.S. Matthews,  
City Archivist,  
City Hall,  
Vancouver, British Columbia.

File: Pe3.

Dear Major Matthews:

Thank you for loaning us a copy of your speech at our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration. We have now made several copies for ourselves and are returning it to you for your records.

Yours very truly,

Jack Birt

per S.M.

-/sm  
Enc.

**THE CLERIC AND THE DEVIL.**

A cleric, fired with unctuous ire, was preaching to the people;  
Exhorting them to shun the evil one and all his ways;  
And witness that the devil, from a niche beneath the steeple,  
Was listening interestedly, in open-mouthed amaze.

As deeper still and deeper raged the denunciations;  
Great tears rolled down poor Satan's cheeks, and sorrow filled his cup;  
He moaned, "If I'm responsible for all those depredations,  
I shall repent, and give the whole damnation business up."

So, when the sermon ended, to the vestry room he hurried,  
To tell of his repentant state, with many a moan and sob.  
The cleric paled, and stuttered out in accents weak and worried,  
"Pray do not be so radical, or I shall lose my job."

Then Satan, with sardonic yell, puffed out in sulphurous vapor;  
All hell's hot halls re-echoed as he roared upon his way.  
He called for carbon pencils, and some thick asbestos paper,