

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



Then, once a year, there was a croquet tournament. It was very fashionable. All the “swells” attended, as much for the afternoon tea and gossip as for the games. Sunshades, very pretty, very expensive, were carried by the ladies and the gentlemen wore “boater” straw hats and flannel—white flannel—trousers. The tournament went on for three or four days, mostly in the afternoons. It was very grand.

But, in time, golf came and croquet dwindled. In this year of 1951 I do not know of a croquet lawn in Vancouver, though I feel sure someone has one somewhere. I do not believe there is a croquet club. They keep very quiet if there is. I never see anything about croquet in the newspapers. It seems to be a forgotten game.

Not so in 1900 and soon after. It was exceptionally fashionable for the elite “West Enders.” I repeat, the “West End”—there was nowhere else. Not even Kitsilano Hill, started in 1905, was settled up then. Kitsilano was not even named until 1905. Grandview was a clearing; so was Fairview.

I think the only croquet lawn in Fairview was that of Capt. C. Gardner Johnson at the northeast corner of Alder and Broadway.

J.S. Matthews.

17 August 1951.

MISS ESTHER J. CUMMINGS (MISS GEORGIA SWENEY’S DAUGHTER), OF SANTA PAULA, CALIFORNIA, 3 MAY 1947.

Miss Esther J. Cummings, daughter of Miss Georgia Sweney, the first school teacher on the site of the City of Vancouver (Hastings Sawmill School), having informed me by letter and telegraph that she would arrive in Vancouver on Thursday, 24 April 1947 from Seattle, Washington, for a six days visit to the scene of her late mother’s labours, I arranged with Mr. M.H. Burns, manager Hotel Vancouver, to have a room ready for her as accommodation is restricted. I also arranged for an invitation to an executive committee “tea” of the Vancouver Woman’s Canadian Club following their annual meeting on the 25th, and also for the Chief Factor, Native Daughters of B.C., Post No. 2, to show Miss Cummings over the old Hastings Sawmill store, Alma Road, now a club-museum, which her mother must have visited many times while she was at Hastings Sawmill 85 or more years ago. Also, she was taken for a drive around Stanley Park, and my own dear wife gave a tea in the Georgian Club. Miss Cummings did a lot of shopping at the Hudson’s Bay Co. store and paid us two visits to the City Archives; so that all in all she must have had a busy and pleasant time. In addition, the weather was bright—no rain and tolerably warm. It is felt that she went away from Vancouver with pleasant recollections of her visit.

And, somewhat strangely, so out-of-the-picture in such matters is the Mayor and the Mayor’s Office, that she did not even call upon them and I doubt if they know she has been, which illustrates the usefulness of the City Archives if they bestir themselves with endeavours to make the visits of historic personages pleasant.

Miss Cummings is an American lady of prepossessing appearance; tall, somewhat inclined to be heavily built; good looking, greying hair, very well and fashionably dressed, and an extremely good conversationalist. She does not take a great deal of interest in public affairs in her native land, but being affluent spends much of her time in the larger cities. She has just completed a tour of the eastern American States, during which she met Sir John Balfour, the new British Ambassador. She tells me that she had not seen her walnut ranch at Santa Paula since October last—save for seven days short visit. She did not know the acreage of her fruit ranch, was a little confused when I asked the acreage and replied that they did not count that way, but by the number of boxes of fruit grown each year. She did, however, say that they had (or rather she had) two thousand walnut trees beside many oranges in the grove. I made a hurried mental estimate of how much in dollars two thousand walnut trees would be at walnuts selling, retail, in Canada at sixty cents per pound. Miss Cummings said that she had twenty-five men working on her fruit ranch at Santa Paula, California.

My assistant brought forth the Sweney relics Miss Cummings had sent us; also the miniature of her mother in its tiny frame. Miss Cummings said the earrings in their plush case had originally been purchased in Persia when her father was there in a sailing ship. This accounts for the ornamentation in

star and crescent (Mohammedan). That when she was seventeen—on her 17th birthday—they were given to her, and that was the means of their escaping destruction when their home at Santa Paula was burned to the ground some years ago. She said her mother had a “whole box” full of jewellery which her father had given her mother. “Nothing, absolutely nothing,” she said, had been saved. They lost everything historical, and such small things as her mother’s hymnal (which we have) was saved because it had been given to her late brother.

The most interesting historical remark Miss Cummings made was when she told how her mother left British Columbia never to come back. It appears she was on a visit to friends in Victoria, and it was so chanced that at the time a lady friend from California was also visiting. During the daily conversations this lady spoke in the most glowing terms of the beauty of California, of the magnificence of the orange blossoms when the orange trees were blooming, and so on, with the result that Miss Sweney said she had a great desire to see it—as naturally she would after a sojourn on the shores of Burrard Inlet at the rather drab Hastings Sawmill clearing. The lady replied, “Why not come back with me!” Miss Cummings eagerly accepted the invitation and when the lady went back on the steamer went with her and stayed at the lady’s home as a visitor.

There she met Mr. Cummings, who was a cousin of the lady who had invited her, and in course of time Miss Georgia became Mrs. Cummings. And that is the end of that story.

Mrs. Cummings, née Miss Georgia Sweney, never revisited Burrard Inlet. Some few years ago she was preparing for a visit when she fell and broke her wrist and the doctor would not let her come.

Miss Cummings added, significantly: “I don’t suppose Mother ever realised the part she had played in the establishment of schools in Vancouver. And,” she continued, “I did not think much of it myself until my last visit when I thought, on the spur of the moment, that I would pay my respects to the School Board Office here and tell them who I was. There I accidentally met a gentleman who said that I should visit the City Hall and the City Archives, and you know the rest.” She called upon us.

Miss Cummings said her mother was very musical and used to tell her children how she had tried to teach the Indians of Hastings Sawmill music. “Mother,” said she, “told us they could not ‘hold a tune,’ and used to mimic them—not in a disparaging way—but to illustrate her difficulties in trying to teach the Indian children at the Sawmill to understand singing and music.”

The Cummings Ranch at Santa Paula, California, is forty miles south of Santa Barbara, and sixty miles north of [blank.]

On Monday, 28 April, Miss Cummings called at the City Archives and had tea with me. On Tuesday she went to Victoria; on Wednesday (30th) she called again, said goodbye, and left for the south by the Great Northern train.

Miss Cummings told me that when she arrived at the Hotel Vancouver on 24 April she went to her room and found it “a bower of flowers.” (We had taken care that it should be.) She immediately got into a motor car and called on Mrs. Matthews at my home, and brought a great bouquet of red and white carnations to my wife.

I think that is about all concerning the visit of this very charming lady to Vancouver.

J.S. Matthews

3 May 1947.