

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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No wonder, Major, they left the place. They did not believe in the Selalacum. Nor do I—yet as I recall the sorrow and tears that were shed, their losses and hopes shattered I, too, never care to return to Deep Cove. Let the Selalacum dwell undisturbed.

I have complied with your request and from what I have written you personally may get a glimmer of what the conditions were like in the early 70's. As for the public of today they prefer things more spectacular and exciting—blood and thunder.

So long Major,

Yours

J. Warren Bell

SALMON-BELLIES.

December, 1948.

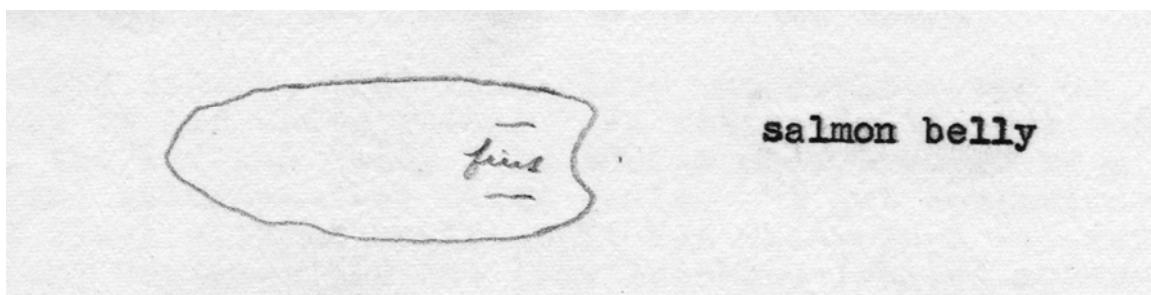
Major J.S. Matthews,
Archivist,
City Hall,
Vancouver.

My dear Major:

You asked me, "What do you know about Salmon-Bellies?"

I know the word Salmon-Bellies is frowned upon by ladies of culture. At a lacrosse match many years ago between the Tecumsahs of Toronto and the New Westminster Salmon-Bellies played at New Westminster, a fashionably dressed lady was sitting behind me on the grandstand and when she heard the Salmon-Bellies announced as they came on the field, she said, addressing no one in particular, "What a vulgar name for a team—simply horrible—could they not get a more suitable name—most ridiculous—indecent, etc." At last I turned and told her that the team was the choicest picked from the city. The Salmon-belly was the choicest—the best part of the fish. That's why they took the name Salmon-Bellies. Of course Salmon-Abdomen might be more refined but we are not cultured folk for we were brought up on Salmon-Bellies and love 'em. "What rot—perfectly ridiculous" and she ignored me. I guess it is a crude word.

Getting back to the subject of Salmon-Bellies, I remember how the canneries used to salt the bellies when they had a surplus of salmon, and could not use them. They would cut off the bellies in one piece from the back and tail leaving the two lower fins which are the richest and most tasty part of the fish. The belly looked something like this when flattened out.



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The rest of the fish was dumped into the river. What a waste, what a great waste! Yes, it was a waste, but there were millions of salmon—millions uncaught would spawn and die. Right or wrong that's what was done.

The Kit resembled a small stave barrel cut in two. After the bellies were scraped and washed and a layer of salt put on the bottom of the kit—a Salmon-Bellie was snugly placed—a generous sprinkling of salt on it and another Salmon-Bellie packed carefully—more salt more fish until the kit was full. Salt was then packed in any vacancy—top put on, and iron hoops around the kit tightened.

Only bellies, one asks, why not the whole fish? Folk were pernickety those days.

Willie and Dick McBride (afterwards Sir Richard), whose father was warden of the Penitentiary at Sapperton, during their school holidays, worked at Holbrook's Cannery just across the road from the Pen's gate. Both boys wanted to earn extra pocket money. They tallied fish from the boats as they were unloaded, kept time for Indians and Chinese and such jobs. Dick told me the Chinese would have some cans filled with bellies only, mark them so they could tell them when they came out to be washed after steaming in the retorts—reserving them for their own use. Dick said they were fine and offered to get me some but I never bothered for we always had Salmon-Bellies for breakfast at the Brunette Mills' cookhouse, where old Jim Kee, the Chinese cook, dished up the same kind of food every day. Oatmeal porridge, Salmon-Bellies with boiled potatoes and flap-jacks. I asked him once why did he not have a change. "Allee time same—salmon-belly—Siwashie chicken. You no likee Siwashie-chicken? Him hip good."

The specie of salmon for salting was invariably sock-eye, which is also the best for canning as the bones cook softer and require less cooking than the coho.

Spring (also called Chinook and Tyhee) are excellent fish. Pinks or humpback (humpies) and dog salmon (now known as "chums,") were not canned in the early days, Dog Salmon, so called because they were smoked to feed the dogs.

White salmon, that looks like the Spring, can be distinguished by its white flesh. We never ate it, "cultus" (worthless) the Indians said. An Indian once brought me a 10 or 12 pound salmon—price fifty cents. I got suspicious and cut the flesh with my knife. It was white so I refused to buy, saying whiteman did not like tee-kope (white) salmon. "Indian no eat 'em—no good." I asked him who told him it was no good. "My belly tell me—make plenty sick" he answered.

The Indian also said that all fish that did not have scales, like the dog salmon were inferior. The true Spring is red—there is also a pink Spring as well as the White Spring. I asked an Indian how he accounted for the difference.

He explained that sometimes they got mismated. A white salmon would mate up with a red on the spawning grounds, and the result would be a pink or halfbreed Spring—that's how they came to have varying shades of color.

ROBERT DUNSMUIR. LADNER'S LANDING. LAIDLAW'S CANNERY.

I was a passenger on the *Robert Dunsmuir*, Captain William Rogers. We stopped at Laidlaw's cannery, Ladner's Landing. Laidlaw hailed the captain and asked if he wanted any salmon. "Yes" replied Rogers, "haven't had any for a week." "Plenty here on the wharf just help yourself," says Jim Laidlaw. Turning to Captain Spalding, Stipendiary Magistrate of Nanaimo, he asked him to pick out some as all salmon looked alike to him. I followed the two down the gangplank to where the fish were. "There is a good one" says Spalding, pushing aside a fish with his foot. "How do I know? Look how plump it is—look at his belly—see here." Taking his pocket knife he cut the side lengthwise exposing the flesh. "See those heavy white streaks of fat between red layers. Here is one not so good." Repeating the cutting as on the first, he drew attention to the faint lines of white between layers "Very little fat there."

"What is the best part of the fish" asks Rogers. "The front or head end—the bellie, of course, is the choice part," replies Spalding. "How about the tail, it has no small bones, all solid fish." Spalding went on by saying the tail was O.K. but is the least desirable. The tail is the muscular part of the fish that propels the fish—constant wiggling keeps it lean and strong—no fat, see here, cutting tail, "no white, fatty streaks, wholesome enough but not succulent."

"I've learned something, Captain Spalding, thank you. Hey! Jimmie!" calling his son, who was mate. "Here's a half a dozen salmon, put 'em aboard." Turning to me he said, "You help him, sonny."

Jim Laidlaw calls out, "Could you wait a few minutes, Captain, and I'll go to Westminster with you."

"Don't hurry, Jim, take your time; the tide has just started to flood."

Some twenty years ago I was waiting at Woodward's fish counter. A well-dressed English lady was being served by the clerk who held the tail of a salmon in his hand for her inspection. She asked to see one that was in the case which he took in his other hand, held both out. "Which would you say is the bettah?" inquired the lady. "Both the same, lady, in fact they are off the same fish," assured the clerk. "Very well, I'll take either."

After the lady had gone, I asked him why did he tell the lady that two tails were off the same fish—who ever saw a salmon with two tails? "One must be able to size up his customer." That story sounds a bit fishy, Major, but it is so—believe it or not.

Scientists and research have proven how ignorant we were in the past. Piscatorial students, with a smug indulgent smile at my primitive ignorance, assure me that white salmon are superior to red, they have more vitamin A, B, C, D (and perhaps X, Y, Z) than red salmon. It's simply prejudice—if you shut your eyes and ate white salmon you could not tell the difference. Dog salmon the same, for they are one of the most delectable of all, having a most exquisite flavor of their own.

"As for salmon bellies—you throw away the best and keep the poorest part from our proven scientific point. And another thing"—but I walked away, saying to myself "Where ignorance is bliss it is folly to be blistered."

I'll make a bargain with you, Major. You rustle a salt salmon-belly some day. I'll provide potatoes and pick some lambs-quarter [*Indian spinach*] from the clearing. First we'll scrape the salt off—scrub and wash the salmon—let it soak in cold water over night. Next day par-boil it for a few minutes—drain off water, then boil for 15 or 20 minutes. Potatoes should be cooked with jackets on.

We'll sit down to a meal of Siwash chicken.

So long Major,

Yours sincerely,

J. Warren Bell

[LETTER FROM J. WARREN BELL.]

Vancouver, B.C.

My dear Major:

I called on my brother, Ward, at his office in the Hall-Holland Block—B.C. Labor Department, this afternoon. He read your recent letters to me so as to know all there was to be known re "First white children born in the vicinity of Vancouver."

He though your idea was a good one, not for our sakes, but for our children and children's children.

His daughter, Olive, had told him you had written her and she has a photo you can keep if you wish to; also he will ask her to take the Bell Family Bible and leave it with you so as to have a photostat of any information that you may want.