

Early Vancouver

Volume Seven

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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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Spaniard Discoverer Of Fraser?

By MAJ. J. S. Matthews
Vancouver Archivist

Who discovered the Fraser river? What European first saw the site of New Westminster?

It is accepted by all; has been for decades, that Simon Fraser discovered the Fraser river, and followed it to a short distance below Marpole; consequently he must have been the first white man to see the site of your beautiful city. The story is not acceptable to me, for I believe that the river had already been discovered by the Spanish explorer, Pilot Jose Maria Narvaez, in the tiny vessel the "Santa Saturnina". Narvaez was here in these waters in 1791; Fraser came in 1808.

Narvaez was sent from Nootka to find out what was inside the Straits of Juan de Fuca, and explored about Bellingham, sailed up the coast, anchored at White Rock; again at Point Grey. He sailed into English Bay, named Stanley Park, Punta de la Bodega (Ferguson Point), and proceeded to Howe Sound in July, 1791.

Next year, 1792, Capt. Vancouver met the Spaniards Galiano and Valdes off Point Grey. They told him one of their officers had found a large river and named it Rio Blanco, but they had tried to find it but could not. Vancouver answered that he had not seen a large river, and the two Spaniards thought it queer that all four of them could not find it, yet a previous visitor had found it and named it.

If Narvaez ever kept a log of his voyage no one seems to have seen it. He did, however, make a chart. Most historians find it difficult to interpret his chart, but to one with local knowledge it is simple. My interpretation is that Narvaez anchored his ship off the Semiahmoo Indian village, proceeded by small boat to Boundary Bay; then following the edge of the high land by one of the many Indian trails,—precisely the same route as that of the Great Northern Railway today—until he came to the large river the Indians had told him about. He reached the shore opposite New Westminster, saw the river, but, being without a small boat was unable to embark on its waters, retraced his steps to Boundary Bay, embarked on his ship, hoping to enter the river by its mouth further west.

But, sailing north, the Fraser river sandheads extended into the

sea so far that he could not get near the land, and the shallows forced him to continue to Point Grey, where he anchored in about 20 feet. Then, taking a small boat, he proceeded up the North arm as far as Marpole, and returned downstream via the middle arm. How else can it be accounted for that, on his chart and in the precise position of Sea Island, Narvaez marks an island of that island's shape?

The volume of water in the north arm was so much smaller than the volume he had seen at New Westminster that Narvaez was puzzled, and continued his search, convinced that, somewhere

about there must be a wide mouth. Entering English Bay he hoped to find it, but failing, and being in haste on account of shortness of food for his many men crowded on a tiny vessel, gave up the search, but marked all that land west of Port Moody and New Westminster, "Island of Langara".

There is no question as to the authenticity of his chart for it was used in connection with the arbitration proceedings under the German emperor to settle the international boundary.

After a good many years' work, finally, some months ago I completed by compilation "NARVAEZ,

DISCOVERER OF THE RIO BLANCO, 1791", illustrated with maps and photographs, and put it away. It is in typescript; there is no intention to publish it. It has been reviewed by Spanish historians, and my contention that the Fraser river was discovered by Narvaez in 1791 has their approval, and they concur that he reached the river bank opposite New Westminster.

It is felt that my point of view may be of sufficient interest to the good people of New Westminster as to make it known. Students and others can easily obtain a copy of Narvaez's chart and puzzle it out for themselves as to what it means. Not more than half a dozen persons have ever seen my compilation, or know of its existence, so that, at this moment, the 'Salmonbellies' have the field to themselves.

TERRA NOVA.

ORIGIN OF NAME. W.K. MELLIS. NEWFOUNDLAND FISHERMEN.

Conversation with William Knight Mellis, 3228 Vanness Avenue, pioneer, August 1886, of "Mellis' Stage" to Terra Nova, Lulu Island, who kindly called at the City Archives this morning, 17 October 1949.

Mr. Mellis: "My dad named Terra Nova. He was James Alexander Mellis. It means Newfoundland, i.e., new land; Terra Nova. That was the last piece of ground the government owned on Lulu Island—all the rest had been preempted. They sold my father and Hugh Youdall, I think it was eighty acres, but, anyway, it was quite a bit; but it had to be divided into ten acre lots for Newfoundland fishermen. There were the men—Parsons, Gordon, Horne and Haugh—the latter pronounced 'half.' They fished salmon; millions of salmon those days. Three of them, Parson, Horne and Gordon died there; they 'stuck,' no descendants, none of them there now, all gone. The Mellises came from Newfoundland; so did Parsons and Youdall. They could not get enough Newfoundlanders to go there so they got anyone they could. Just three Newfoundland families."