Early Vancouver

Volume One

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

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Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1931-1932.

A Collection of Historical Data, Maps, and Plans Made with the Assistance of Pioneers of Vancouver Between March and December 1931.

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

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residence spread south from Pender Street down Cambie, Hamilton, Homer, Richards and Seymour almost to Drake Street. In 1898, Richards and Seymour streets were fairly well filled with narrow houses, on 25-foot lots. Howe and Hornby streets, close in, were more pretentious, and there were some very nice homes on Robson Street.

As time went on, many splendid residences were built on that slope which looks westerly over English Bay. More of the best closed in about Stanley Park entrances, beyond Denman Street. This would be the period prior to about 1908. During this time, Robson, Georgia and Beach Avenue were considered most select districts. In the summer of 1900 or 1901, Davie Street was opened up, and a year or so later, the finest residence in Vancouver, that of B.T. Rogers of the Sugar Refinery, was built at the corner of Davie and Nicola streets—now the Angus Apartments. Robson Street and Georgia Street were lined with beautiful avenues of trees.

Then came the real estate “boom” days. Vancouver was growing; the slogan “100,000 men in 1910” was heard on all sides. Shaughnessy, Kitsilano were talked of, cheaper houses gradually closed the gaps, filled up the vacant lots in the West End; then came the apartment house, and the West End went down a strictly ultra-fashionable district.

About 1910, fine homes were built on the brow of the hill overlooking Kitsilano Beach, others spread along the waterfront along Point Grey Road; a section under building restrictions was placed on the market just west of the Indian Reserve, but it did not hold its superiority long. There were hundreds of vacant lots in all sections, many even in the older West End.

The throwing open for settlement of the first section of Shaughnessy Heights—reputed at the time to be the most wonderful residential section of Vancouver’s future—unsettled all previous ideas of where a fine home should be built. The buggy was disappearing, the motor car was coming; distances were a less formidable an obstacle than formerly. The verandah was still a necessity, but rapidly nearing its end, and soon to shrink into a mere porch. The broad verandah, the scene so long ago of evening parties, of Sunday afternoon gatherings, of sunshine and fresh air in the summer days, was about to disappear. The Ford motor car killed it.

A few isolated houses of excellence and much cost went down the Magee Road (Marine Drive), all on selected sites, large surrounding grounds, but they were comparatively few. Then the Great War came, and for a time building almost ceased, until at its conclusion there was almost a dearth of houses in Vancouver.

Despite the high cost of material following the war, building went on the rampage. Kerrisdale grew like a mushroom, high class houses soon filled up Quilchena, the territory contiguous to Fourth Avenue West grew apace with houses of a lesser pretence. From 1923 to 1928 there was a rush of building; whole streets were filled in a few months, especially down the slope from the crest of Granville Street South in all directions.

Then the stock market crashed. In 1930, carpenters and builders struggled on under much financial worry. In 1931, building very nearly ceased.

This sketchy resume is somewhat misleading, not altogether accurate; it gives but the roughest outline, misses more than it encloses, of a very interesting subject, the building of the splendid homes of our beautiful city.

J.S.M.

15 JULY 1931 - BICYCLES AND BICYCLE PATHS.

The bicycle “craze” was prevalent in Vancouver, as elsewhere, about 1900; almost every family had at least one, some had more; nearly all young men, and most young women, many elderly men and some elderly women rode. It was a convenient mode of travel in a city as yet unprovided with a full street car service; a growing city badly scattered, and among a people who, as yet, had acquired no individual wealth to speak of. Motor cars were still some years off, many had neither

facilities, room, nor means to possess stables or buggies. The bicycle was no longer the unwieldy "penny-ha'penny," big wheel small wheel affair. The "safety" bicycle had come, and with it the Dunlop pneumatic tire; and the "coaster brake" was soon coming. Both wheels were the same size now; it was easily mounted and dismounted, and a fall from it rarely gave much hurt, as the old high wheel, hard tire "wheel" did.

The bicycle became so popular that racks were put up in the vestibules of the small office buildings to receive the "machines" of those employed there and who had business there. At the City Hall, there was a long rack which would accommodate perhaps two dozen bicycles. Similar racks existed at the C.P.R. Depot, and also public places such as parks, post office and hotel lobbies. At the corner of Pender and Granville streets, where now stands the Rogers Buildings, a school for bicycle riding was flourishing. IT covered two or three lots, about 75 feet by 120 feet, covered with crushed cinders pressed down, and fenced with a high fence to hide it from the curious, for pupils did not take kindly to making a public amusement for street spectators by their efforts to stay on a "wheel." Dealers in bicycles did a "land office" business, the managers of wholesale bicycle firms were important men and well known. Repairs shops were many; a knowledge of the merits or demerits of the different makes was essential to any young person with pretences of being up-to-date, and the performance of the best and fastest riders at the big bicycle meetings at Brockton Point and elsewhere were discussed on the corner, in the drawing room and the newspapers. Manufacturers advertised widely; one form was to have trick riders—men who rode on one wheel, etc.—perform on the street in the daytime, usually evening, for the enlightenment of passersby. All kinds of gadgets were invented as accessories, including "fancy toned" bells (rung with the thumb to warn pedestrians to get out of the way), lamps of fancy design (which burned kerosene), extra hand brakes, handles and handlebars of high, low and medium twist, mud guards large and small, rims of wood and rims of polished metal; and they all had their advocates, some violent. A pair of bicycle clips was an article of common household furniture, as necessary as a street car ticket is now.

At the period spoken of, concrete sidewalks were limited to the space in front of some of the more recently constructed downtown buildings; all others, on Granville, Hastings, Cordova streets were wooden planks running crosswise; in the residential streets all sidewalks were of wood, mostly five-foot width crosswise save in the more sparsely settled, newer districts, where they were three-plank lengthwise. The streets were largely macadam or wooden plank. In winter, the macadam was muddy; the planks, frequently loose, had a nasty habit of squirting dirty water up the cracks between when a weight passed over, frequently soiling the trouser legs. This led to riding on the wooden sidewalks, especially in the dark or dusk. Pedestrians on these walks noised their objections with the result that a by-law regulating bicycle traffic and bicyclists was passed by the City Council. The fine for the first offence of riding on a sidewalk was five dollars; it was unlawful to ride a bicycle at night without a light. A license to ride was necessary, and the police were kept busy enforcing the law; a daily crop of charges were heard at the police court.

The "machines" were so numerous that the City Council ordered special bicycle paths constructed on those streets which were most frequently used. These paths were invariably cinder surfaced, and rolled flat, and ran along the edge of the street between the gutter and wooden sidewalk. They were about six feet wide, and constantly kept in order, level and smooth, by city workmen.

The bicycle paths led to and from some well-frequented area, or beside streets where there was considerable vehicular traffic. One ran from Seymour Street, along the north side, to the entrance of Stanley Park; another on the west side of Seymour from Robson to Pacific Street; a third from Granville Street South (from the Third Avenue Bridge) from the bridge, along the north side of Third Avenue to about Maple Street, where the track turned off in an indeterminate direction through the clearing until it reached Greer's Beach. This cinder path ended at Maple Street. There must have been others; I think there were, perhaps on Pender Street West, to the Park, on Powell Street, on Westminster Avenue leading to Mount Pleasant, and on Beatty or Cambie streets to the bridge, and then up the hill on the south side of False Creek. These cinder paths ceased as they approached the centre of the business section of that day.

Gradually, the bicycle craze died down, and the street car system was extended into even remote and sparsely settled districts; then the motor car came. The bicycle paths fell into disrepair, and finally mysteriously disappeared.

J. S. Matthews

NOTE ADDED LATER:

This was written in 1931. It's very different in 1941. Many bicycles now. JSM

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