

Early Vancouver

Volume One

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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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had no medical attention; no bandages or other medical supplies were available; all had been burned. The sailors had sized up the situation and dashed off with the badly needed medical aids.

"They were certainly very weary after their long pull, and no doubt very hungry too.

"At first the men distributing the food from the wagons said there was not a morsel left for the sailors, but as they were emptying the crates and boxes the food had been sent in—it was a topsy-turvy confusion of eggs hurriedly fried and placed between slices of bread, or perhaps hard boiled eggs in a soda can protection—a man named Slater, who together with myself had been appointed by the Mayor to police and superintend, and who had taken a very prominent part in seeing that women and children were served first, called out that he had discovered in one of the crates something which had been missed. You must realise that almost complete darkness prevailed in the bivouac. It was a little parcel, neatly done up, and was given to the sailors. Some thoughtful New Westminster woman had prepared some sandwiches, just fried eggs between bread, but with it was a little note which feelingly said she regretted it was very little, but was all she had. Sane, sensible woman, whoever she was; how pleased she would have been had she seen what her little mite accomplished for those splendid men.

"The sailor man who got the note turned and faced the east, raised his hand in an attitude of supplication, and offered the most beautiful prayer for New Westminster and its people, imploring the Almighty never to let them be in such distress, and asking the Lord to reward them a hundredfold. You do not expect that sort of thing from a rough sailor, and in the middle of the night."

It may have been a reflection of light which I saw, or it may have been a tear which fell, but when some days later I read these notes to Mr. Gallagher, I glanced out of the corner of my eye and now I am sure it was not a reflection.

"Some say," he went on, "that I have an undue prejudice in favour of New Westminster. It is hard to forget, to forget their wholeheartedness in the hour of our great distress."

AN IMPROVISED MORGUE FOR THE DEAD.

"The Regina Hotel was, of course, the only building of any consequence which escaped, and it was located at the corner of Cambie and Water Street, north of the fire as it were. But on Westminster Avenue near the bridge, south of the fire, and protected by an indent of water from False Creek, six or seven buildings, including the Bridge Hotel, survived. The Bridge Hotel on the east side of Westminster Avenue adjoined the bridge, while across the road almost opposite were three houses: John Boulton's, our police magistrate; Mr. John's, the collector of customs; and Mr. Costie's, the meat merchant; all three houses close together on the west side. We converted a small building adjoining the Bridge Hotel into a rude morgue, and before daylight there were deposited there the remains of twenty-one persons."

NOTE ADDED LATER:

"The back of the Bridge Hotel was on piles; later a platform on piles was built, and, after the fire, you could drive a team around the back of the hotel. I know, because I used to shoot duck from it myself." — W.F. Findlay, 12 April 1932.

"We gathered together some bits of board and built a table about three feet high, five feet wide and thirty feet long, and as each body—or part of a body—was brought in, it was reverently laid upon that table. Some bodies had not an arm, nor foot, nor head left; some of the poor remains would not hold together; some weighed a few pounds, perhaps twenty or thereabouts; all had so suffered by fire that they were not recognisable. The Bridge Hotel gave us their blankets, and in those were wrapped such remains as were found, with a little note attached to each parcel saying where the contents were picked up.

"Altogether, there were twenty-one parcels, and I know of others, those which were not discovered until the work of clearing away the debris of the burned buildings began. There was

one on Hastings Street, another on Pender Street, both about one hundred feet from the railway crossing; another was discovered beneath a mattress.

"The little morgue building was lighted by candles—there was no electric light or gas here then—and in the feeble illumination, a procession passed in and out all night; some were searchers bringing their sad burden; others distracted fathers and mothers looking for their little ones. Their faces and hands were grimed with sweat and charcoal dust; their clothes were such as they had when they first ran. When the dawn broke, they were still searching.

"One incident is that of two elderly people, strangers to the city. I met the old lady on Carrall Street, deeply distressed; she said she had lost her husband. I consoled her and went on. A little further on I met her husband, also deeply perturbed, until I told him I had seen his wife up the road and, turning around, pointed to her sitting on a black root at the corner of Hastings Road and Carrall Street.

"It was never known, and never will be, how many lost their lives. Of all the remains found, three only, those found at the corner of Hastings and Columbia streets, were recognisable by their features; then, too, we made an effort to keep the number as low as possible. Three bodies were taken out of a well down near St. James Church on Cordova Street East; at the time, there were some shacks down there. They were evidently husband, wife and little daughter, and must have been strangers, saw the fire coming, rushed away, and seeing a well, jumped into it. There was three or four feet of water in the well, and their clothing was unharmed by fire, but their faces were livid; the fire had, apparently, swirled over the well, and they had been suffocated, not burned. They were well dressed; the lady had gloves on her hands. It was the gum and pitch which made the fire so terrible, so fierce, and created a black, bitter smoke more smothering than burning oil.

"The fire occurred at a time when families and others were scattered; that is the explanation of how so many were separated from their kindred. It was early on a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the midday meal was over, some had gone to Sunday school, others out for pleasure. Most of the people were new arrivals, and, the men folk especially, took the opportunity of the bright Sunday afternoon to look over the townsite, the very shape of which, now so familiar, was then, just after the falling of the trees, strange even to many who might be called 'old-timers.' The town was new, and the thought uppermost in our minds was, 'Would it grow east or west of Carrall Street'; the question was debated at every corner; many were off spying out the land. Then, with terrible swiftness, the fire came upon them; each had to fly to save their own life; there was no time for reuniting."

THE FIRST CHURCH SERVICE AFTER THE FIRE. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH. REVEREND C.L. THOMPSON.

"No, I'm afraid not," smiled Mr. Gallagher. "I'm afraid we did not pay much attention to church or Sunday school. On Sundays we were too busy working; hauling lumber, clearing, building the city again. But there is a little story I want to tell you about.

"On Sunday afternoon, the Sunday after the fire, about two p.m.—it happened on Cordova Street, just a little west of Carrall Street on the north side of Cordova Street—Reverend Mr. Thompson, the Presbyterian clergyman, came along and suggested to the workmen who were grading Cordova Street and covering it with planks, three by twelve planks, that perhaps they ought to cease work for a moment and give thanks to the Almighty for their escape the previous Sunday. Everyone in sight laid down their tools; the teamsters left their horses standing. Then they picked up the empty spike kegs and some planks and carried them into an empty store in process of erection for Geo. L. Allan, the boot and shoe merchant, and made rows of seats out of the kegs and planks. About one hundred and fifty went in to the service.

"Just at that moment His Worship Mayor MacLean came along and joined in the simple yet deeply impressive service. The men were, of course, in their working clothes; the service was not long, and was soon over.