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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There is a minute in the Minute book of the City Council recording the receipt of a petition from numerous citizens protesting against the removal of the post office and its establishment at so inconvenient a location. “Out in the woods.”

6 JULY 1931 - SPRATT’S ARK, EARLY CANNERY IN VANCOUVER.

Spratt’s Ark, a very early cannery in Vancouver, was located just west of Burrard Street; a sort of floating cannery, sometimes used as a wharf. Another very early cannery was at the foot of Burrard Street on False Creek—a small one. The largest cannery, the English Bay Cannery, stood a little to the east of the foot of Trutch Street—on English Bay. There was another, the Great Northern Cannery, almost opposite across the bay on an unnamed shore and in an unnamed district, now West Vancouver.

ENGLISH BAY CANNERY.

Of the English Bay Cannery, Lieutenant Colonel W.D.S. Rorison, M.C., V.D., son of R.D. Rorison, and member of the firm of R.D. Rorison and Company Limited, Dominion Building, formerly owners of the Royal Nurseries at Royal on the Eburne-Vancouver interurban line, now of Cambie, Lulu Island, said:

“We must have built our house at 3148 Point Grey Road in 1908. I think I lived there from 1908 to 1911 inclusive. Yes, we did buy the lumber of the old cannery, and used a lot of it in building our house; our rafters, and such heavy timbers; the outside lumber of the cannery was no use.” (Note: it would be interesting to examine those timbers to see how they have stood the ravages of time.) “I have heard it said that when Mr. Alexander’s house at the Hastings Sawmill was pulled down after the Great War, that the timbers were in excellent preservation, and they must have been placed there in the 1860s. There were fourteen rooms in our house, and it had a sort of peaked tower. It faced north.”

As late as 1928, that is, roughly 25 years after the old English Bay Cannery ceased operations, a heap of rusty red iron stood, like an island, on the shore of Kitsilano waterfront under the old cannery location. It was the remains of the old scrap tin heap. In the earlier days, and after 1900, salmon canners of the British Columbia coast made their own cans. A large amount of sheet tinned iron was used, and there was much waste in cutting out the round tops and bottoms from flat sheets. The waste clippings were shot through the cannery floor into the water beneath; it did not pay to save it.

6 JULY 1931 - SPANISH BANKS. “COLUMBIA RIVER” SALMON FISHING BOATS.

Prior to 1900, and for some years afterwards, the lights of the fishing boats, twinkling on the summer sea off Spanish Banks made a pretty evening sight for spectators on the shore of English Bay. Each boat was necessitated by law to carry two lights; one on the fishing boat, the other on a float at the end of the net. We were still in the sail age—there were gas engines, but few were used. The sails were stowed whilst fishing, and the hundreds, literally hundreds, of tiny lights flickering in the distance, the last light from the sun which had set, the smooth sea, made an enchanting summer’s scene.

At that time, Spratt’s Ark had long since disappeared, the cannery on False Creek was canning, without success, clams, etc. The fish caught off Spanish Banks and Point Grey were delivered for canning to the English Bay Cannery, the Great Northern Cannery, the cannery in a bay beyond Point Atkinson—around the corner of the lighthouse at Point Atkinson, and to North Arm and Fraser River canneries.

THE GREAT SALMON YEAR, 1900.

Bathing on the beaches of Vancouver was almost impossible for most part of a month in the summer of 1900; dead salmon lay on the shore in thousands. The ebb and flow of each tide

rolled them backwards and forwards on the sands. Strolling on the sands of English Bay was "dangerous," especially in the twilight, for a decaying fish, half buried in the sand, was unnoticeable until, by a slipping step, it was detected; at other times, a foot trod upon one, and the decaying flesh stuck to the boot; the smell was extremely objectionable, could not be easily removed, and it was impossible to go home by street car until it had. For time, bathing was almost stopped entirely. A floating carcass, badly decayed after a week in the water, would bump a swimmer's chin, or a swimming stroke would break it in two. That part of English Bay which lies at the foot of Denman Street—the bathing beach at that time was very much shorter than now, not more than perhaps 200 yards long—was strewn with dead salmon, and their stench was nauseating.

The tremendous catch on the Fraser River was the cause of this. It was the big year; divisible by four, and the canneries could not handle the tremendous number of salmon offered by the fishermen. During visits to Steveston I have heard fishermen cursing because, after having caught 500 or even 1000 fish, they would be told on arrival at the cannery that the day's limit was 150, perhaps 200, maybe 250. The limit was not announced before the fish were caught; that would be impossible. Frequently, a boat would scarcely have finished putting out a net before it was full, the cedar floats had sunk, and before it could be got in again it was alive with fish. As will be seen by the daily newspapers of that period, the limit was published—merely as a news item to inform those interested as to how the canneries were operating. There was no thought seemingly that the day might come when willful waste would bring woeful want. The limit, as news, merely showed that the fish were running well, and the canneries well supplied and getting enough supplies to keep them busy as bees, which was expected during the short season.

On arrival at the cannery, the fishermen would anxiously enquire what the day's limit was, perhaps 150—there were cases of less—perhaps 300 or more, but if he had more in his boat there was no lack of comment; anything from lamentations to curses. The requisite number, the limit, were pitched on the wharf, the rest thrown into the sea—with much grumbling at the labour thereof. Hundreds of boats were operating, and thus, in a week or ten days, the sea was littered with dead and decaying salmon, and there was no lack of supply.

It was a strikingly impressive sight to see the fishing boats leave Steveston on a Sunday evening. Promptly at six p.m. the gun would boom, signal that the fishing was to start, and the report would echo up and down the river. Scarcely had the echo died down than a low, rumbling roar would roll, as of a wagon trundling over a wooden bridge. It could be heard for a mile or more. It was the running of the cedar floats over the gunwales of the fishing boats. Then, almost simultaneously, a flight of hundreds of sails would creep out from their concealment around the cannery wharves, and, like a flock of gulls, drift out into the middle of the river, the fishermen paying out the nets, the rumbling of the floats would gradually die down; then all was still. The fleet was fishing.

It frequently happened, in 1900, that a boat would scarcely have completed putting out its nets before it was time to haul it in again; the floats began to disappear beneath the surface of the water, the black dots—the floats—would no longer be an even distribution curving on the surface; one here, another there, or a group, irregularly; the net was full. By the time it was hauled in, more would be in it until it was a labour to haul it in.

The fisherman returned to the cannery. "What's the limit?" The checker would look down at his boat, full and low in the water with salmon, and shout back, "150," perhaps 250, perhaps more. Then there was no lack of curses; all that labour, and luck, a boat full, perhaps 500, perhaps 800. The requisite limit was pitched on the wharf, and the remainder cast in the sea. And the fishermen growled as they did it; the "hard luck" of having caught too many.

This continued week after week, and thus is was that English Bay bathing beaches became, after a week or so, littered with decaying salmon, borne in on the tides.

At this time, if anyone wanted a salmon, it was frequently given free; sometimes it was paid for, five cents. In the summer of 1900, July, I was at Steveston; my wife wanted a salmon to take home. One was wrapped in a newspaper, and in attempting to bring it home without revealing that we were taking one, the whole secret leaked out. It was under my arm, and in the crush to

board the conveyance, my arm was squeezed, and the slippery salmon squirted out of the paper, tail first. Several persons witnessed the incident; my wife was mortified; we had been caught in the act. We were guilty of the indignity of carrying home so worthless a trifle as a salmon, and what was worse, there could be no doubt, it was our intention to eat it when we got it there. Awful.

It was not considered good taste to serve salmon for meals when guests were present. If it was done, the hostess sometimes apologised, said it was a "potluck" meal, 'twas all she had, and excused it. Salmon was *infra dignitatum* among the elite, 'twas food fit for Siwashes. And even to this day, 1931, when it is sometimes thirty-five cents a pound, the old reluctance to place salmon on the table when guests are present still lingers among some of our older citizens.

About this time, 1900, salmon entered several of the creeks on False Creek. They penetrated as far as Third Avenue West and Cedar Street up a creek which entered the bay in the centre of Kitsilano Beach, and also as far as Eighth Avenue West, between Columbia and Yukon streets in Mount Pleasant, by a creek which emptied its water into False Creek near the southern end of the Cambie Street Bridge.

J.S. Matthews

6 JULY 1931 - WILD ANIMALS IN VANCOUVER. POINT GREY.

"We had a rose pergola in our garden. It was entered from the basement as well as from outside. One day, soon after we first went to live at 4406 West Second Avenue, between Trimble and Sasamat, just above the air station at Jericho—it was a wild place then—one day, father opened the basement door leading to the pergola, and there in front of him lay a cougar. It just ran off quietly. That was in September 1912."

Miss Violette Russell, the speaker, whose father Mr. N.H. Russell died recently, was one of the first ten pupils at the Point Grey School, the first, now known as Queen Mary School, supposed to be the most beautifully located school in Canada. The old school is still standing nearby. In childhood days, she and other children were sometimes, but not always, accompanied by some older person on their way, a short distance, through the woods to school, "in case there was a cougar around."

"On another occasion," said Miss Russell, "perhaps two years after we went there, perhaps three, we were having dinner in the dining room, when we heard the chickens in the chicken shed cackling. Father grasped a poker out of the fender and went over the verandah with it in his hand. He must have made a slight noise as he walked over the verandah, and they must have heard him coming, for two cougars jumped over the fence and ran off into the woods."

J.S.M.

15 AUGUST 1931 - WILD ANIMALS IN VANCOUVER. LITTLE MOUNTAIN. CAPITOL HILL.

"Father shot deer on Little Mountain in 1912," stated Mr. Johnston, the taxi driver. "I have myself seen deer on Capitol Hill in 1914. We did not come to Vancouver until 1906; I was one year old then; afterwards, I went to the Bodwell Road School in South Vancouver, so far as I know the only school there at that time. You know how boys roam, and then father took me with him shooting."

J.S.M.

7 JULY 1931 - STREET RAILWAY. INTERURBAN.

There were three houses only between the two cities of New Westminster and Vancouver when the first interurban street railway first operated. Authority: H.P. McCraney.