

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

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Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1932.

Supplemental to volume one collected in 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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price for the oil; said they had been buying very good oil from the oil company for thirty cents per gallon; said "I presume your other charges were in proportion." A five- or six-year fight between the garages and the oil company was on.

Time went on; more garages started up. They were all compelled to buy their gasoline from the Imperial company—there was no other source of supply for gasoline—and the company charged them twenty cents per gallon in tank wagons—and delivered it, at first in big iron drums of 90 gallons odd, afterwards a new type of delivery created by the conversion of the old kerosene (coal oil) tank wagons; the kerosene sales were declining with the spread of electric light, the gasoline sales were increasing, and for a time tank wagon carried both products in compartments with a blue painted tap for coal oil and a red one for gasoline. The first tank wagon in Vancouver (coal oil) held a total of 280 gallons divided into three compartments; then a "monster" wagon came holding no less than 420 gallons, also in three compartments. All were horse-drawn. The garages put in underground storage tanks, and the S.F. Bowser Co. furnished pumps, placed on the curb of the sidewalk, simple things, an adaptation of the former kerosene tank pump used for coal oil in grocery stores. Various agents, and also the garages, obtained agencies for diverse brands of lubricating oil, which they diligently "pushed" to the exclusion of Imperial Oil products of like nature. The animosity between the company and the garages on the matter of lubricating oils increased, and the garages had the upper hand, for whenever an automobile was brought into the repair shop, the garages immediately told the owner—frequently, regardless of the truth—that the "trouble" was with the oil, if it was other than their own, and especially if it was Imperial Oil. The Imperial Oil lubricating sales did not decrease; new cars were arriving, but the proportion of sales of gallons of lubricating oil grew lower and lower. They introduced a very fine oil called "Zerolene," but it made no headway.

In addition to this the garages sold the gasoline which they purchased for 20¢ per gallon from the monopoly for 35¢ to the car owner. The oil company protested; the garage man became violent at their interference, the car owner blamed the oil company for the "high price of gasoline," and took vengeance on the oil company by buying the garage man's lubricating oils, which suited the garage man exactly. The poor company caught it both ways, yet was the innocent party in both. And the travelling salesman Matthews, the company's only salesman at that time, "caught it" from both and all, including his employers.

Finally in desperation, one day he prevailed upon the manager, C.M. Rolston, to visit the West End Garage. They received so "warm" a welcome there that Mr. Rolston was glad to escape. Together they returned to the office. The company did not want to enter the retail business.

THE FIRST FILLING STATION FOR GASOLINE.

Finally the manager reluctantly gave permission. Matthews had long contended that the only way, or course, was to sell the automobile owner direct. Matthews was told he could tell automobile owners they could have their cars filled at the Imperial Oil warehouse for twenty cents per gallon.

The next morning Matthews was passing the old Court House on Hastings Street when a motor car chugged past; he signaled for it to stop—there were very few cars in Vancouver then—and informed the driver that gasoline could be got for twenty cents. The driver expressed astonishment and surprise. At the moment there was a huge cotton banner strung across the front of the West End Garage on Granville Street which read, "GASOLINE. 30¢."

This appeared following a "fight" between the garages; they had been charging 35¢; thirty-five cents for liquid piped out of tank wagon into their tanks for twenty cents. No tax those days—15¢ profit on 20¢.

That afternoon the first car appeared at the warehouse on Smythe Street and was filled by pouring from big five gallon buckets into a big funnel. It was a messy business, and dangerous from the slopping. The next day two or three came, then more, until finally they became a nuisance. They got in the warehouse yard, the horse-drawn trucks of the company could not get next their loading platforms; loaded teams could not get out of the yard; finally the foreman, R.C. (Bud) Mulligan locked the yard gate, and stuck up a sign, "Automobiles not allowed inside." The bucket brigade functioned in the roadway, after packing the heavy buckets, one in each hand, backwards and forwards.

C.M. Rolston then conceived of the idea of the service station. Facing the street he built an open side shed—it was summer time, 1908—of corrugated iron. It was about five feet deep, ten or twelve wide, and eight feet high in front, with plank floor. In the centre was built a tapered concrete pillar, about three feet high, twelve inches square at top, and on this was placed a thirteen gallon kitchen water tank fitted with a glass (steam gauge glass) gauge marked off in one gallons with white paint dots. The tank was connected with the main storage tank. A bar room chair and a cushion for it completed the picture, excepting for the hose pipe, a piece ten feet long of garden hose without nozzle at end, which was drained with thumb and finger by the attendant after filling a car, and removed at night.

The system was so highly successful that soon all cars in Vancouver took their gasoline at Smythe and Cambie Street, the service grew inadequate—on a pre-holiday afternoon the writer has seen fifty or sixty cars in line awaiting their turn to be filled up. This caused much adverse comment; the poor company caught it from all angles. The remedy of a second tank was quickly applied, but the “damage” had been done. Garage owners were approached by the Shell Company for support if they established, and naturally got that support in full measure.

But in the meantime, the fame of the establishment had spread. Enquiries were received from all parts of North America as to how it was operated, and soon far more elaborate filling stations than the original one began to be erected in the United States. Vancouver was slow to adopt the ornamental filling station.

THE FIRST SERVICE STATION ATTENDANT.

The first service station attendant was Mr. J.C. Rollston, an uncle of Mr. C.M. Rolston—names spelt differently—and father of Mr. Chester S. Rollston, inventor of the endless clothesline now used, and subsequently manager of McLennan, McFeely and Prior, the large hardware merchants. He was an elderly man, an artist of note in his younger days, a kindly pious gentleman who for want of something better to do had been glad to accept the position of night watchman at the company's plant. He was installed as attendant. At first, he would sometimes sit for half a day without serving one car. He still lives (1933) at 858 Burrard Street where he has lived for over twenty years.

In later years, the Imperial Oil Company Limited added a second filling station on 12th Avenue (north side) near Granville Street, then a very elaborate one at the southeast corner of Cordova and Columbia; the former one was a tin shed. Then the number increased rapidly, private firms operating public garages installed sidewalk pumps. These sidewalk pumps became a nuisance to traffic on account of motor cars drawing up in front of them and blocking the roadway, and were finally forbidden by civic bylaw.

During the war the Imperial Oil service stations—they had three or perhaps four in operation then—were operated by young ladies, women of good family in most cases. They wore a uniform of khaki coat, breeches, and leather leggings. They continued on this work until after 1919, when the troops returned. Their employment was a war emergency.

After the reestablishment following war conditions, service stations and garages grew in number so rapidly in all directions that each month, it seemed, saw the addition of a score or more.

But the parent of them all was the little tin shed on Cambie and Smythe streets with its concrete pedestal and 13 gallon red tank, its bit of garden hose, the barroom chair and cushion, and the white-haired old gentleman sitting patiently for the customer who never came to the only filling station in all Vancouver.

The old corrugated iron shelter continued in use for approximately two years, and was replaced by a plain concrete shelter opened for business on 8 August 1910—see photographs in possession of Imperial Oil Limited—built into a concrete wall which replaced the old board fence. One tank only was built in the new structure; it was afterwards that business demanded a second tank on top of the wall. J.C. Rollston was still the only attendant when the new structure was opened.

Read by C.M. Rolston and by him approved, 24 March 1933.

J.S. Matthews, late “the clerk.”