

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

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2011 Edition (Originally Published 1933)

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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Footnote or Endnote Reference:

Major James Skitt Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011), 33.

Bibliographic Entry:

Matthews, Major James Skitt. *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 2. Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011.

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16 JULY 1935 – WATERWORKS (CAPILANO RIVER).

Mr. Oben's statement that Chief Joe Capilano told him that he was the first white man who had penetrated to the source of the Capilano River, is disputed by Mr. A.P. Horne who points out that Mr. Oben says that the crossed from the First Narrows to Howe Sound in June 1892.

Mr. Horne, together with two white men and two Indians, one of whom was Chief Joe crossed from Howe Sound to the First Narrows the summer following his arrival in Vancouver, which was in November 1889, and Mr. Horne says that Chief Joe told him his party was the first to cross.

It may have been that Chief Joe meant that one party was the first to cross from north to south and the other from south to north.

(See A.P. Horne, Narratives.)

CITY ARCHIVIST.

WATERWORKS (CAPILANO). CHIEF JOE CAPILANO. MR. AND MRS. PHILLIP OBEN.

Mr. and Mrs. Phillip Oben, 4415 Kingsway, Central Park, Thursday, 14 April 1932.

"Chief Joe Capilano told me at the time, June 1892, that I was the first white man who had penetrated to the source of the Capilano River," said Mr. Oben, while Mrs. Oben sat listening. (For detailed account of dates, etc., see Judge Howay's *History of B.C.*, page 956.)

"Vancouver was about to install a water system, to do away with the wells which had formerly supplied the water, and, of course, as you know the Capilano system was chosen in place of the Coquitlam proposal. J.J. Nickson, afterwards the well-known contractor, was superintendent of the Capilano water system construction, and it was he who sent me to find out where the water of the Capilano River came from, and how much; facts which were then unknown. That was in June 1892.

"Chief Joe Capilano of North Vancouver, and another Indian, whose name escapes me for the moment, were selected as my guides, and the three of us started out with sixty pounds of grub, rifle, and blankets each on our backs, quite a heavy load considering the rough mountainous country we were going into. We followed the river course for the simple reason that we had no choice; no trail existed.

"So we travelled all the first day on the river gravel, and camped the first night on a sandbar, then all the next day until the evening when we came right up to the mountain, and, strangely, there we found the water coming up from under a rock; there was about twelve feet of snow on the ground; it was a very peculiar condition. Then we found a space, a hollow about fifty feet square, where there was vegetation, and we went down to that, cut down some trees and made a camp fire.

"The next morning at daybreak Chief Joe said to me, 'I'm going to have a serious time to find my way'; the mountains were clothed in fog. You know, an Indian finds his way by the top of the mountains, steers by them, and on this particular morning they were shrouded in fog. The ground was covered with ice, and on the third day our path lay over the ice; for hours we crossed a great slide; I think it took about four hours to cross that slide; two mountain slides had slid down into the valley, and it was from beneath this great slide, as from a tunnel, that the water was emerging; it came from underneath. Then we came to a lake, not a large one, but about the size of Trout Lake here in Grandview. The lake, of course, frozen over, so we walked across the ice. It was Sunday morning, and I recall remarking that the people in Vancouver would be going to church, so we stopped, and had coffee and biscuits, or rather what we had left. We were 1,800 feet above sea level. I should have named that lake; it was doubtless unnamed at the time; it could not possibly have been named then. Presently Capilano said to me, 'We have got to get a move on as soon as possible because it is a long distance from our objective,' so we left there after about an hour's rest. Joe's objective was the top of a mountain about 2,000 feet high, and he kept circling and circling around the mountain. Our packs were heavy, and to add to our trials it began to pour with heavy rain until we and our packs were soaked, and that made the packs heavier still. Finally we reached the top, and found the moss completely trampled down by deer. We walked pretty fast, lost no time, and it

was very dark long before we got to saltwater on the Howe Sound side. We had had little to eat that day, our grub was all gone, and were a little troubled as to what we should do for food.

"But by some whim of fortune, when we got down to saltwater in Howe Sound we found an old shack on the shore. I do not know exactly where it was, not having been there since; I was depending on Joe. We were soaking wet, and had nothing to eat with us. Presently I heard some hammering in the shack, and on approaching it slipped aside a door—just a board which did as a door—and a voice inside said, 'Hello, where did you come from?' I replied, 'It's all right, friend, we've just come across.' It was very dark at the time.

"The man, whose name I do not know, enquired who we were, and as I did not want to tell him what we were there for, said that we were engineers searching for a railway route. I asked him if he had any flour, and he replied, 'Yes, come along with me,' and took us to a little shack. The shack was locked, it was pouring rain, we had to get shelter, so I took my axe and pried the door open. It was very dark, about ten p.m. both inside and outside, but there was an old stove in the shack, so we lit a fire to dry ourselves and our blankets. Presently he said, 'Come along with me,' so I left the two Indians drying their clothes and blankets, and he took me to his little house about a thousand yards further on, introduced me to his wife; they had one child; the lady was very nervous, so I explained myself, told her that I wanted something to eat.

"She set to, and made some buns, and certainly treated me splendidly, and in a short time I was able to take a lot of buns to the Indians, when we all ate together. What we should have done without those kind people I do not know; they were very, very kind. I never found out who they were.

"So the man came back with me to 'our' shack, and afterwards suggested that I come over to his house to sleep. 'No,' I replied, 'I have slept with the chief here since I left the city, and I am going to sleep here tonight,' I thanked him, but we three all stayed together.

"The next morning was a lovely one, and they brought us more biscuits and I do not know what else; we had lots to eat.

"The settler had an old flat bottomed boat which was not seaworthy so we set to work to fix it up; tarred and painted it and so on; it took us two days, and on the third, at daybreak, we started home in the fixed up flat bottom boat, and the settler came with us; four in the boat. Joe, that is Capilano Joe, said that if we worked hard we could reach Vancouver 'by tonight.' We worked hard, good and hard; it was a long pull, and it was midnight when we reached the First Narrows.

"When we got to the city I gave the man fifty dollars I had on me; at first he would not take it, but I made him. It was his intention to fill the boat up with provisions and return home the next day.

"On my way home I first called in at J.J. Nickson's and got him out of bed, told him of the trip, that we had found the sources of the water of the Capilano River, that a portion of the water went into Howe Sound, the smaller portion, but that the larger portion came into the Capilano River. It was a queer circumstance, but the fact was actually that the lake from which the Capilano River started was on the pivot of the mountain top, and two streams flowed out of the lake, that going into the Capilano being the heaviest. J.J. Nickson suggested that we should have to crib the water back so that all the water would come into the Capilano. Joe told me that there was another little lake higher up still, but we did not go up there, and I have never been to our little lake since. Our little lake was a beautiful spot, perpetually fed by the snow from the surrounding mountains, and so far as I know, nameless at the time. It was a fortunate thing we went up when we did; five or six men tried it afterwards and failed, the mountain side was very precipitous, almost straight up in places on both sides; we crossed the river dozens of times, were wet up to our middle doing so, and the ice was very troublesome; we used a piece of an augur as an alpenstock.

"The Capilano Water Works was owned by R.P. Rithet, Captain Johnny Irving, and two other Victoria men. Hugh Keefer was the engineer, J.W. McFarland the secretary, and J.J. Nickson the superintendent, and to the latter belongs the credit of having laid out the pipe line route, and then built it. He afterwards went to work for the gas works in Westminster, and died some years ago at Sechelt. I was assistant superintendent or foreman of works, and was one of the first sub-marine divers; Llewellyn, who had been a diver in the British navy, and who remained with the city for so many years, was another. Steve

Madison, afterwards for many years water works foreman, was pot boy, that is, he kept the lead molten, the lead with which we sealed the water main joints.

"The steel pipes on shore, 16" and 22" were made at the Albion Iron Works, Victoria; the pipes beneath the waters of the Narrows were 12", made in England. They were of the chain bell type, and were adopted on the recommendation of Mr. Hugh Keefer, the engineer; they were a sort of ball and socket joint; we could not get them in Canada, so brought them from England. We dragged them across the bottom of the Narrows. It was a difficult job, as it had to be done quick when the tide was slack and water still; we could not do it when the tide was flowing or ebbing. At the head of the pipe we had two logs, one on each side, and we pulled on that with a hand winch. Although Mr. Keefer was the engineer, it was Mr. Nickson who laid the pipe line route down from the mountain.

"Later I conducted the first party of Vancouver aldermen to the dam."

CLEARING THE FOREST OFF THE WEST END.

"I came to Vancouver from Toronto in March 1887; they were just putting in the foundations of the Hotel Vancouver when I arrived. I had been a pioneer contractor at West Toronto Junction; owned a lot of land there on the other side of the Western Road; went up there in the early days and took it up on preemption. But Mrs. Oben's health was not good, so I sacrificed all and came west with \$20,000 or \$25,000 and dropped the whole of it clearing the trees off the West End for the C.P.R.

"I cleared all the land west of Nicola Street down to Stanley Park of the standing trees. My camp was down on Georgia Street—there was no Georgia Street then—" (Note: Mrs. Capt. Percy Nye says, see ante, "Mr. Oben is a relative of ours. North of Robson Street the land was in stumps and rubbish when we came earlier than Mr. Oben; south of Robson the trees were still standing long after we came; these Mr. Oben cleared away." Also see panorama photo of "West End in '90s.") "at the foot of Gilford Street on Coal Harbour. I had thirty or forty men and eight yolk of oxen taking out the logs and lashing. I sold the logs to the men who built the mill," (Fader Bros.) "now enlarged and known as Robertson and Hackett's at the southern foot of Granville Street on False Creek." (Beach Avenue.) "We had a lot of trouble with fires, an awfully trying time; fires were getting into the slashing constantly, and gave us much worry. That was the second year we were here, I think, probably 1889, perhaps 1890." (See Mrs. Nye's narrative re keeping fires out of Stanley Park.)

VANCOUVER NERVOUS ABOUT FIRES.

"We had considerable excitement on the occasion of the second fire in Vancouver, 6 June 1887. It was up near the corner of Hastings and Granville," (actually Pender and Howe) "where I had a number of houses. Rainsford and others, all had wagons up at the corner of Hastings and Granville, everything ready, in case our row of houses caught fire. They were loading people onto cars at the C.P.R. station," (see *Early Vancouver*, Matthews) "and taking them off up towards Port Moody. I recall a man, a plasterer he was who lived on Seymour Street, his daughter had died the day before. He picked her poor dead body up, and carried her down to the C.P.R. Depot, and put her in the car where Mrs. Oben was. I had all the money I brought with me from Toronto in a valise."

HOTEL VANCOUVER.

Note: Mr. Oben states that at the time of his arrival in March 1887 they were putting down the foundations of the Hotel Vancouver.

A photograph of the digging of the Vancouver Hotel foundations is marked 1886 by Mr. Cambie, the C.P.R. engineer.

The plans, the first plans, of the Hotel Vancouver were prepared in the Ferguson Block, southeast corner Carrall and Powell Street, and were destroyed in the Great Fire of 13 June 1886. All had to be re-drawn.

SETTLEMENT OF SOUTH VANCOUVER. PARK AVENUE—COMMERCIAL DRIVE.

"After certain financial misfortune I took up a holding of acres on the other side of Park Avenue," (Commercial Drive) "formerly in South Vancouver, now in the city, cleared and cultivated it, and still own it. About that time some sixty-four holdings of from five to eight acres were given out as an experiment by the government; it was an idea I think of R.G. Tatlow's. My wife and I and the baby lived in a little one

room shack, and I took a job with the city of Vancouver at one dollar a day and glad to get it. It took me an hour and a half to walk into my job and another one and a half to walk back at night by the trail.

"Prior to securing a job I had had a peculiar experience. Times were very hard for me just at that moment; there was no food in the shack and I went to Vancouver searching for work. I went up Granville Street; not cut out properly then, and sat there on the corner, feeling pretty blue, no grub at home and no work to be found. I looked down on the ground in front of where I sat, I saw something which looked like a leaf, reached out, and picked up a paper bill; it was for \$5.00. I had a sack full of grub on my shoulder and was on my way home before much time had elapsed.

"Our son Roy Oben served overseas in a trawler. In loading coal from a small war vessel at sea a coal basket fell on him, and he is now deaf, totally deaf, in consequence. He was in the R.C.N.V.R., transferred to the British Navy; was student at law before the war, is now school teacher and postmaster at Lasqueti Island."

(Above as narrated to J.S. Matthews, 14 April 1932.)

This camp was close to Denman Street. (See Phillip Oben.)

NOTE ADDED LATER:

Doubt now, 1934, if this is correct. This is probably a F. Dally photo of 1867-1870, Provincial Archives. JSM.



CLEARING THE FOREST OFF THE
WEST END.
(near English Bay) ^{west of} Denman⁹

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