Early Vancouver
Volume Three

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

2011 Edition (Originally Published 1935)

Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1933-1934.

Supplemental to Volumes One and Two collected in 1931-1932.

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.

Copyright Statement

© 2011 City of Vancouver. Any or all of Early Vancouver may be used without restriction as to the nature or purpose of the use, even if that use is for commercial purposes. You may copy, distribute, adapt and transmit the work. It is required that a link or attribution be made to the City of Vancouver.

Reproductions

High resolution versions of any graphic items in Early Vancouver are available. A fee may apply.

Citing Information

When referencing the 2011 edition of Early Vancouver, please cite the page number that appears at the bottom of the page in the PDF version only, not the page number indicated by your PDF reader. Here are samples of how to cite this source:

Footnote or Endnote Reference:

Bibliographic Entry:

Contact Information

City of Vancouver Archives
1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J9
604.736.8561
archives@vancouver.ca
vancouver.ca/archives
Colonel Hulme afterwards commanded the 62nd Overseas Battalion, the third battalion to leave Vancouver.

"ARCHIVISTS WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD." SIR ARTHUR CURRIE.

About April 1932, Gen. Sir Arthur Currie passed through Vancouver on his way from the Orient to eastern Canada, and was, one afternoon about four, informally entertained by a large assemblage of ex-overseas officers who had gathered together to shake hands, chat, and drink a cocktail in the “Oval Room” of the Hotel Vancouver.

Prior to 1899, a large wooden shed served as the first drill hall in Vancouver, and General Currie, as former Corporal Currie of the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery, Victoria, had once entered it on a holiday event when the Victoria battalion had paid a visit to the 2nd Battalion in Vancouver. In 1931, the many regiments of Vancouver subscribed together to erect a memorial to mark the site of the old drill shed, and General Currie was invited to unveil the bronze tablet, but being indisposed in health, he declined, so the memorial was taken to the Oval Room for him to see. The shining new bronze tablet, bearing in part the words, “HERE STOOD THE DRILL SHED,” was suitable placed upon an easel, and, conducted by a group of senior officers, General Currie was escorted across the spacious room to view it; Major Matthews, City Archivist, Vancouver, long known to General Currie as a collector of military relics and records of British Columbia, as well as an old friend of many years, was among them, and had been responsible for the proposal, creation and design of the tablet.

The general stood in front of the tablet for a moment or so, gazing and reading, and then, placing his hand on Major Matthews’ shoulder, said with much feeling, “Gentlemen. Men like Matthews here are worth their weight in gold.”

He then continued with some reminiscences, etc.

“Men like” an archivist must naturally include all archivists.

Just why Gen. Currie expressed himself thus must forever remain unknown, but it might have had something to do with his then recent unfortunate experience when he had to defend himself in the courts against unjust and libellous statements that “he sacrificed his men,” and that the records fortunately kept—as all military units have to keep—served in some especially useful way to vindicate his actions in the Great War.
THE VANCOUVER SUN

ROMANTIC STORY OF VANCOUVER

MAY 12, 1936

CITY ARCHIVES RECORD

38 YEARS OF COLLECTING

Many of the pictures which appeared in the first edition of the Vancouver Sun were from the office of Major J. S. Matthews. He was the Major, or the Man, as he was called, who was responsible for collecting the Vancouver archives. These pictures will be found in this week's edition.

When subscribers to The Vancouver Sun (now The Vancouver Post) first picked up their newspapers, they would see that in addition to the regular columns, there were being presented free with the weekly newspapers, a series of photographs and articles on the history of Vancouver.

THE STORY

Major J. S. Matthews

In those small rooms, it is possible to reconstruct the entire story in word and picture from that day in 1792 when Captain George Vancouver first sighted Burrard Inlet.

From then on, the story of Burrard Inlet has gone on to become the story of the city before the attention of a large portion of the world.

On April 4, 1858, the 50th anniversary of Vancouver's incorporation, three great British dailies, "The Times," "The Morning Post," and the "Manchester Guardian," published half-page illustrations of Vancouver past and present, furnished by the City Archives.

HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY

This month, 10,000 copies of "Van
couver, A Short History" prepared by students of Templeton High School, were put into circulation. Much of the material contained in this attractive and accurate booklet was furnished by the City Archives.

These are only two instances of the immense amount of work being done by the archives.

The hobby which Major Matthews became interested in 1858, became in 1899 a voluntary, unpaid job. The job was the preservation of the historical records of the people and city of Vancouver.

At first, he worked at his own home, but in 1921, the Public Library granted use of the attic of the City Hall (and later the City Hall) to the paper and ink of Vancouver.

At first, he worked at his own home, but in 1921, he was given a place to work where he could keep his records safe and secure.

"DIRTIER ROOM IN B. C."

It had no heat, light, or water, and was described at the time the Major took it over in June, 1921, as "the dirtiest room in British Columbia."

Before, a pigeon had got in and been unable to get out. Its bare bones still lay on the floor. A hole in the floor looked down on a toilet below. A corner had been cleaned off. A hanger had been kept in the corner. In great chunks and against one wall, a wooden ladder led to the roof above.

The Major carried in his filing cabinet, a cardboard box.

For furniture, he had a discarded desk which was in danger of falling to pieces if moved or a box-room chair.

He had no office supplies, no salary, and no allowance for expenses.

Every time an old picture or old book came his way, he would inspect it and put it in its proper place.

When winter came and his attic office grew cold, the Major put on his overcoat and kept on working.

SMAK BEGGININGS

The day he put his first picture in his cardboard filing box, he looked at the solitary document lying loose at the bottom, commenting:

"You poor thing. You're the beginning of the record office for a great city. Mark my words.

Vancouver City Council, under Mayor L. D. Taylor appointed Major Matthews first City Archivist in June, 1927, with an honorarium of $25 per month out of which he had to defray his own expenses. The archives which had been at his home were now brought to a tiny room on the City Hall's tenth floor.

At the beginning of the fiscal year 1933-34, City Council voted the archivist $500. His honorarium was raised to $500 a month and another room was needed.

When Sir Henry Myers, director of the British Museum, visited the City in 1922, he told Major Matthews that he would gladly accept the astounding difficulties under which you labor.

Today, although the facilities are improved, the archivist is laboring under perhaps even more trying conditions. Vancouver's Archives has increased a thousand-fold the demands made on him for his work.

"These are busy days," the major admitted, "British, United States, Canadian and local press, industrial and commercial firms, and students from our schools, give us very little rest.

The title "Old Timer" is himself, his secretary, Miss Margaret Olle, and occasionally a volunteer worker. The present accommodation is woefully inadequate.

AN OLD-TIMER

Although he does not come himself under the class of original pioneers of Vancouver, the major is an old-timer to the city.

Born of an old Welsh family at White House, Newton, Montgomery-shire, Wales, in 1872, he was brought up privately in England and in public school until he was 14 years old, when he accompanied his parents in 1887.

In March, 1898, young Matthews set out from Auckland to see the world, in a vessel named the R.M.S. "Alameda," bound for San Francisco. He reached Vancouver Nov. 3, that year.

JOINED IMPERIAL OIL

Joining the Imperial Oil Company as an office boy, he is one of the three British Columbia employees in the office of the centre of Cordova and Cumbler Streets.

He recalls that in those days, when he resided at the corner of Burrard and Pacific Streets, he cut firewood on the clearing west of Burrard; piled blackberries where is now Davie Street; and that below Burrard Street, Burrard Street was a narrow track through stumps.

It was a cross-country trail from Pacific Avenue and Humboldt to the "office boy" walking each morning to Robson and Granville.

Gradually he rose in the company's employ. He can recall selling the first can of gasoline to the first auto owner in British Columbia and making the suggestion which led to the Imperial Oil building the first gasoline station here, the first on the North American continent.

The Major's military record began in 1903 when he joined the 4th Regiment, D.C.O.R., Vancouver, as a private. During the North West Rebellion in September, 1914, he commanded that regiment. He was company commander of the 162nd (Comox-Athletic) Overstone Battalion, C.E.F., raised at Comox in the winter of 1914-15, and was responsible for the change of name to "North British Columbians.

FOUGHT AT YPRES

Major Matthews was present in action at Ypres, Aug.-Sept., 1914; led his unit in the assault and capture of Regina Trench, Oct. 21, 1916, and was severely wounded. Subsequently he served in France and in 1918 was loaned to the American Recruiting Service as lecturer on the Pacific Coast of United States.
While in the No. 4 London General Hospital recuperating from wounds in 1915, the Major devised the "Trench Fire Cube." This cube, about the size of a walnut, was made from heated and compressed paraffine wax and soaked in water, capable of providing heat for about a quart of water at the boiling point.

After the Anglo-American Oil Co. of London had, without profit, made and sold some millions, Major Matthews received an order from the commander-in-chief, Earl Haig, to supply enough for one army to make a test with a view to adopting the little article as an official issue to all troops.

The war ended, however, before this could be done.

Now, with the war and his business activities behind him, Vancouver's archivist is concentrating his entire effort to building up archives.

He is very proud of a remark General Sir Arthur Currie made about him when he passed through here just before his death. "Before an assembly of distinguished military officials following the dedication of a memorial tablet the general, putting his arm on Major Matthews' shoulders, said: "Gentlemen, men like Matthews are worth their weight in gold."

"But," the major will tell you when telling about this incident, "The Archives mightn't be here if it wasn't for my wife. She gives me help and encouragement."

In this dilapidated room in the attic of the old City Hall, Main Street, the City Archives found their first home in 1931. Note the plaster off the ceiling, the old hat-room chair, the ancient table, the cardboard box which served as filing cabinet. A square of board, to the right, covered a hole in the floor. It was unheated and without light or water. When winter came, Major J. S. Matthews, archivist, worked in his overcoat, and when darkness fell, he had to prepare to go home.

WHERE ARCHIVES WERE BEGUN

MAY 1 1936
Dear Miss White:

May I have the pleasure of expressing to you the tardy but most hearty thanks for the splendid manner in which you indexed the third volume of “EARLY VANCOUVER.”

Those who do not understand the patience and persistence necessary to make an extensive index to a book of 450 pages replete with detail, might not appreciate the inordinate amount of labour which it involves as fully as I do consequent upon personal experience.

The endeavour you made has resulted in an index which does not annoy whenever referred to, owing to its lack of “never showing what is wanted”—as some indices do—but appears to have taken in everything.

It is an exquisite piece of work, and I hope you will accept my compliments, my gratitude, and my thanks.

I have the honour to be, dear Miss White,

Your obedient servant,

J.S. Matthews
CITY ARCHIVIST.

Miss Elsie White.