

Early Vancouver

Volume Three

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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.

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Footnote or Endnote Reference:

Major James Skitt Matthews, *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 3 (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011), 33.

Bibliographic Entry:

Matthews, Major James Skitt. *Early Vancouver*, Vol. 3. Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2011.

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BRIDGE HOTEL.

The Bridge Hotel has gone many years ago, perhaps 20 or 30 years. Also the people who ran it. There may be a Mrs. Orr, he was an ex M.P.P. She was the oldest daughter and can tell you more than I could. There is also a Mrs. Gilbry. Mr. Gilbry was a railway contractor and died in the Kooteney some place with the small pox. There is also a Mrs. D.C. Marshall. He was of the firm of Davies, Marshall and McNeill (my lawyers), the best in the land. All these girls were daughters of Mrs. Austin of the Bridge Hotel and can tell you a lot of stuff. They were all born in B.C.

(Can't see to read or write. The girl is gone and I can't see.)

Yours truly,

F.W. Hart.

PHILLIP OBEN, PIONEER.

J.S. MATTHEWS.

Published *Daily Province*, 31 July 1933.

Philip Oben has gone, aged 78, and the "Builders of Vancouver" are one fewer.

What did he build? He cleared the ground—or some of it—he swept away the forest that we might have a street, a home, a lawn; he banished age old shadow; he let the sunlight in.

Come to the West End, and there, from the brow of the hill which slopes gently westwards towards Stanley Park, gaze over the panorama of splendid homes which cluster, row on row, between the waters of English Bay and Lost Lagoon; there, all below, below Nicola street, Oben first labored.

Peer into the past, and see the sights that Oben saw; the towering forest, dark and damp; feel the solitude; glimpse the hastening deer. Or listen for the sounds that Oben heard; the slow measured chock, chock, chock, of the woodsman's axe; hear the long swish as falling trees sweep earthwards, the dull, heavy thud as great trunks bump to ground.

Then, phantomlike, glide down to the bunkhouse on Georgia Street, near the park entrance. Watch the cook draw his water from a spring, or "haul off," and with iron bar, strike the steel triangle; a piercing ring, metallic, musical stings the ear, and serves as dinner gong to call weary men to supper. Here comes the tired bull puncher, and his eight yoke of oxen—hauling forest debris into heaps for burning is hard work—and following down the skid road, plods "The Boss," Oben.

The Royal Engineers, who in 1863 first surveyed the "Brickmaker's Claim," i.e., the West End, wrote across their map, "heavily timbered land, very swampy in places," and so it was; old logging bosses say "the finest stand of timber I ever saw"; old sportsmen shot wild duck in the swale below the Court House. Then Morton, Hailstone, Brighthouse, the original preemptors, who got their land title at "Our Government House in Our City of New Westminster" from "Victoria, by the Grace of God, etc., etc., and of the Colonies in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Australasia, Queen," sold some logs to Moody's Mill (North Vancouver), more logs to Capt. Stamp's Mill (Hastings Sawmill) and the "oregon pine" (lumber) made went to foreign parts by sailing ship. Solitary axemen hewed octagonal spars for the British Navy.

But the West End forest was seemingly inexhaustible, for in the late eighties, even, oxen were still hauling "turns" of logs to the "rollway" beside the logger's cabin and pigsty at the foot of Davie street, and dumping them into English Bay. Then came Oben, and finished the job; what logs were left he sold to Fader's Mill, (Robertson and Hackett's now).

Oben cleared the land, but it took some winning; the Royal Engineers were right; it was "heavily timbered." Then fire got into the slashings, excitement ran high; one terrible fire and two

frights had made Vancouver nervous, and, too, Stanley Park was in danger. Our first fire boat, a tug, was improvised, and pumped water; the park was saved. Oben won the struggle but lost his fortune.

Phillip Oben was a discoverer. Vancouver's water supply first flowed beneath the Narrows about midnight, March 25, 1889, but none knew positively where it came from. Oben undertook to discover the source of the Capilano River. Together with Capilano Joe and another Indian as guides he set out—no trail existed—each carrying sixty pounds of “grub,” rifle, and blankets, followed upstream, crossed and recrossed waist deep in water, until finally, high up on the precipitous mountainside they found a lake, frozen solid in June, crossed its surface, reached the topmost ridge, food became exhausted, and, half starved, they descended into Howe Sound where they were succored at a pioneer cabin on the shore. Chief Joe (Capilano) said Oben was the first whiteman to traverse those parts.

The pioneer often pays for his courage; Oben paid well for his. He came with wealth of one sort; he departed with wealth of another. He left us a legacy more priceless than jewels; the memory of indomitable courage, of service to his fellows, an honored name, and a gallant sailor son.

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION WITH MRS. FLORENCE OBEN, WIDOW OF THE LATE PHILLIP JOHN WILLIAM OBEN, OF VANCOUVER AND CENTRAL PARK (WHO DIED 4 JULY 1933).

Mrs. Oben was responding to the request for photographs of Mr. Oben by J. White, photographer, corner Oppenheimer and Carrall streets, which shows them at the time Mr. Oben cleared the forest off part of the West End (1889-1890); the other, of Mr. Oben only, taken by an unknown photographer, and used in Judge Howay's *History of British Columbia*.

Major Matthews: (looking at photo) How like Sir Wilfrid Laurier!

Mrs. Oben: “Mr. Oben has been stopped on the street in Vancouver and asked if he was Sir Wilfrid's brother; I believe Sir Wilfrid had a brother visiting in B.C.”

OBEN FAMILY, GENEALOGY AND NAME.

“Oben is not the real name, properly it is Aubin, French Huguenot—they were of the French Huguenots driven out of France in the persecutions some three or four centuries ago, and settled in the nearest land of freedom, the Channel Islands. They were a family of note. My husband's grandfather on the maternal side, for instance, was Major De St. Croix” (English—Cross) “of the island of Jersey, where he lived in a manor house, and served in the island militia—hence his rank—the citizens were expected to raise for the defence of their islands. The major's daughter, Elizabeth, married Captain” (master mariner) “Phillip Aubin, my husband's father. Under the law of the land, the major's estate, at his death, was divided, each child—there were twelve—getting his or her share, the eldest son taking in addition the manor and its lands. My mother-in-law, Elizabeth Aubin, one of twelve children, got her share, one twelfth, in money.

“Elizabeth was a woman of extraordinary capability, and while her husband was at sea on his long trips, managed the family affairs alone. She placed the inheritance, and other monies of her own, in a bank in Jersey, but the manager speculated, the bank became bankrupt, and her money was lost. She had a brother, a Mr. De St. Croix, in Canada, and he suggested that she come to Canada, bringing her children with her. In the absence of her husband she made the decision herself, disposed of her farm—there were 27 cows—all jerseys—and with the money thus acquired proceeded to Toronto, arriving in May 1870, taking with her all her children save Annie and Elizabeth, both married, and one other; three in all, who remained behind in Jersey. Her children, all born in Jersey, were Phillip, my husband, the eldest child who came to Canada, 14 years old at the time; Frank, Carrie” (Mrs. Scott, died in Vancouver six months ago) “Johnny, also a pioneer of Vancouver” (John Oben's early bakery) “and Eliza.”

OBENS ARRIVE IN CANADA. TORONTO, MAY 1890.

“Mrs. Aubin had no sooner started for Canada than her sailor husband died suddenly; dropped dead while walking on some street in Newfoundland; she thus landed in Canada a widow with several children, my husband, Phillip, the eldest, a mere lad of fourteen, among them. Phillip had to go to work. She just