



Great Vancouver Fire Stories

Story 1: The Great Fire

Chuck Davis, Editor in Chief

FIRES IN THE NEW TOWNS OF THE LATE 1800s were not uncommon; what made Vancouver's unique was its speed. A city of about 1,000 wooden buildings was destroyed in less than 45 minutes, some say as little as 20. Details vary in the accounts of eyewitnesses, but all agree it happened with stunning suddenness. "Vancouver didn't burn," said one eyewitness, "it exploded."

It was June 13, 1886, a Sunday. A small crew of Canadian Pacific Railway men was keeping an eye on clearing fires set the day before. "The fire started between Hamilton and Granville streets," volunteer fireman Hugh Campbell told the city archivist in 1931. "The CPR were clearing the land, and the fire got away from them." The reason it got away was a freakish squall, a sudden blast of wind from the west. The wind was strong enough to take the coal hulk Robert Kerr, anchored off Deadman's Island, and push her, dragging her anchor, down to the Hastings Sawmill at the foot of Dunlevy Street. (There, providentially enough, the Kerr served as a refuge for people jumping into the inlet to escape the fury of the fire.) The wind blew big trees over...and blew flames and burning debris right into the sprawling tinder-dry collection of homely wooden buildings that was the two-month-old City of Vancouver.

People tried desperately to save what they could, but the speed of the fire made that virtually impossible: one woman waded into the waters of the inlet with her sewing machine, which was all she saved; Sunday School teacher L.Z. Hall was left with only his Bible. Lauchlan Hamilton, the CPR land commissioner and city alderman, dashed to his office, collected "the most valuable paper," shoved them in a sheaf under his arm and ran into a cauldron of fire, "breathing air as hot as cinders." When he reached safety, he saw that the papers, still under his arm, were charred black.

In the midst of the tragedy there was, as always, a comic touch. Dr. H.E. Langis lamented the loss of his anatomical specimen, a human skeleton. It was found under the ruins of his office. "Do you know what they said when they pick it up? They said, 'This poor fellow must have been very sick before he died—look, his bones are all wired together.'" The death toll is uncertain. A figure as high as 28 has been cited, but an informal inquest held the next day noted only eight confirmed deaths. Many dead could have been burned up without a trace—and the nature of the town was such that there were many transients, whose names would not have been known.

"...the bell of St. James turned to a molten lump of slag when the church in its turn burst into flame."

The Great Fire - continued

Someone who saw the ominous and rising clouds of smoke began furiously ringing the bell of St. James' Church at Powell and Westminster Road (now Main Street). For many that was the first warning of the fire. Then came the alarmed shouts of men, running ahead of the flames to escape and warn the town. But the fire overtook them, leaping from treetop to treetop in the heavily forested area south of Hastings and descended with a roar on the defenceless little town. (A fire-fighting steam pump purchased by the city would not arrive until August. Fire-fighters had only axes, shovels, and buckets.)

Men dropped before their companions' eyes and were consumed in the fire; a mother and her child were found dead at the bottom of a well into which they had leaped for safety, smothered when the flames consumed the oxygen above. The heat was ferocious-the bell of St. James that had warned so many was turned to a molten lump of slag when the church in its turn burst into flame. (The melted bell can be seen today at the Vancouver Museum.) And the fire was erratic: roofs of buildings distant from the flames, like the Presbyterian Church, caught fire when other

buildings much closer to the inferno were still untouched.

Mayor Malcolm Maclean wired Prime Minister Macdonald for assistance ("Our city in ashes..."), and received a prompt hand-written response promising \$5,000. Help from surrounding towns was swift and generous. In *Vancouver, Milltown to Metropolis* Alan Morley writes: "Doctors and women collected medical supplies and bandages, food, clothing, and household goods were donated, and by 6 o'clock in the evening an unending relief caravan was crawling over the Westminster Road and in sight of Vancouver. It passed crowds of refugees making their way to the hospitality of the neighbouring communities, where every door was open to them. By 3 o'clock in the morning, lumber wagons were jolting in from the Fraser communities; nails and tools were unloaded by the light of lanterns and the flickering of still-burning stumps. By daylight, tents and building frames stood in the dawn, with the smoke curling around them and the ashes puffing wherever a man trod.

"In 20 minutes, Vancouver had been wiped off the earth. In 12 hours, it was rising again."

From: The Greater Vancouver Book



Dist P76 (Old photo #: Dist N6) Granville, B.C. [at Water and Abbott Streets], 1882; reproduced [1933?]

Story 2: FIRE! FIRE!

The story as told by the Pioneer Press

ED. NOTE—On June 17th, 1886, while the City was still smouldering from the terrible fire of the previous day, "The Daily News" printed a full account of the wiping out the existence of Vancouver. The Native Sons of B.C. reprinted that story for this publication. Reproduced is a facsimile of "The Daily News" of fifty years ago.

Probably never since the days of Pompeii and Herculaneum was a town wiped out of existence so completely and suddenly as was Vancouver on Sunday. All the morning the usual pleasant breeze from the ocean was spoiled by smoke from fires in the portion of the town-site owned by the C.P.R. Co., west of the part of the town already built, but no alarm was felt in consequence. The place wherein these fires existed was until two or three months ago covered with forest. A large force of men had been engaged in clearing it. The trees were all felled, and the fallen trees, stumps, etc., were being disposed of by burning here and there in separate heaps. A few weeks ago, during a gale from the west, the city was filled with smoke and cinders from these fires, and fire reached close to several outlying buildings, but after some fighting danger was averted. This, doubtless, tended to lull the people into a sense of security on Sunday. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon that the breeze which had been blowing from the west became a gale, and flames surrounded a cabin near a large dwelling to the west of the part of the city solidly built up. A few score men had been on guard with water and buckets, between this dwelling and the cabin, but when the wind became a gale they were forced to flee for their lives and in a few minutes the dwelling was a mass of flames and the whole city was filled with flying cinders and dense clouds of smoke. The flames spread from this building to adjoining ones with amazing rapidity.

The whole city was in flames less than forty minutes after the first house was afire. Of course, this being the case, a number inevitably

perished in the flames. It is to be feared that the seven whose bodies were recovered constitute only a fraction of the whole number who perished. The total number of victims and their identity will probably never be known. With the exception of Mrs. Nash and Mr. Craswell, the bodies recovered were all burned to a crisp and barely recognizable as human remains. Mr. Craswell's body was found in a well wherein he took refuge and died of suffocation. A young man named Johnson, and his mother were found in the same well. Johnson was dead and Mrs. Johnson has since died. The body of Mr. Fawcett, the soda water manufacturer, was identified by his wife by means of his watch-chain.

City of Vancouver Archives



Log P4 (Old photo #: Log N1) Ox Team Hauling Logs Royal City Mills Camp Near Vancouver, B.C., 1889

Persons living near the Harbor and in the eastern part of the city hurried toward the wharves at the Hastings Mill, and crowded upon the steamers moored to the wharves. On the steamers and wharves, while the city was a

mass of roaring flame, were fathered hundreds of frightened and excited men and sobbing women and children. Anon there emerged from the dense smoke one and another gasping and blinded, with singed hair and blistered hand and faces, who had struggled almost too long to save property. A considerable number of people were surrounded by the fire and cornered near J. M. Clute and Co.'s store, and their only means of escape was to make rafts of the planking in a wharf at that place, and push out into the harbour. The wind was blowing fiercely, making the water rough, and the party were in no little peril of drowning. They made their way to a vessel which was at anchor in the harbour, and the watchman on the vessel, with all the proverbial insolence and stupidity of "insect authority," refused to let the party come aboard. He very soon perceived, however, that his refusal "did not count," and that his very life would "not count" for much if he attempted to keep the people off the vessel, and surrendered unconditionally. Those who witnessed the conflagration from the water describe the sight as appalling and wonderful beyond description.

Many of the large number who lived nearer False Creek than the harbour, and made their way toward that body of water, had a hard struggle to escape with their lives. Mr. Joseph Templeton got through only with the assistance of others. Mr. Martin, of the Burrard hotel, barely escaped with his life, and was prostrated when he reached a place of safety. John Boulton and C.A. Johnson saved their lives by lying down and burrowing their faces in the earth. Both are still suffering from their injuries. Everyone suffered not a little from the blinding and suffocating smoke. Families were separated, and agonized women ran wildly about crying for missing children or husbands.

From: Native Sons of B.C. Jubilee Edition

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LGN 1045 (Old photo #: City P30N7 LGN 456 (stored at GN dr 18) LP 47 CVA 371-2570) [Mayor, Council and City officials assembled in front of tent], [Sept. 1886]; copied [190-?]