

A Town is Born

by Jacqui Underwood

STAMP'S MILL WAS ABOUT TO BECOME CIVILIZED. Two men entered the life of the sawmill community that would shape its future for decades to come. The first was the new mill manager, veteran master mariner, the upright, Halifax-born Captain James Raymur. Brought in from Victoria in the new year of 1869 as a replacement for Stamp, he would rule with a strict and pious hand, enforcing his vision of a model town until his death in 1882. Arriving in 1870, to work at his side as accountant and storekeeper, then later following in his footsteps, was the young Richard H. Alexander. An 1862 "Overlander" to the Cariboo goldfields, the 26-year-old Ontario-educated Scot also had been living Victoria, working as a clerk and a longshoreman for the Hudson's Bay Company. For him, the mill would not only become a lifelong career, but a place to raise a family.

Luck-Lucky, may have meant "beautiful grove of maples" to the Squamish but not to Captain Raymur. He toured the mill and was satisfied with its operation, in particular the ultra-modern, steam-powered equipment. It was when he decided to inspect the community that his "scorn of the excesses and haphazard ways of the pioneers" reared its head. There were not only squatters on mill property, there was a substantial beach squat that had grown up next to Deighton's bar on the west side of the settlement. "What is the meaning of this aggregation of filth?" was his oft-quoted rant, "I will not permit a running sore to fasten itself upon an industry entrusted in my care!"

His first act was to drive off all the squatters and their families and family animals from mill land. The squatting Kanakas soon created a new camp on the inner reaches of Coal Harbour, and the historic Kanaka Ranch with its springtime cherry blossoms was born at the foot of Denman Street. "Old Captain Raymur did not like the pigs and chickens running all over the sawdust," recalled one descendent whose grandfather worked at the mill. The Kanakas, who were known to be some of the best employees, took it in their stride and continued to work for the mill. Meantime, back on the property, a company bunkhouse was built for single men and row cottages with proper little gardens began to be established. There were two manager's homes, but Raymur's wife preferred to stay in Victoria. To compete with the bars in rowdy Gastown, Raymur built a meeting room with Vancouver's first library for more cerebral entertainment.



Captain James A. Raymur took over the mill in 1869, when Stamp was ousted. Raymur was a paternalistic manager, creating a model settlement, with a library and meeting room, and proper housing for mill employees. Resident magistrate of Granville, which encompassed both the mill and Gastown, he was astounded by Gastown's filth, and set about cleaning up not just the physical but moral environment of the community. Raymur vowed to eliminate alcoholism and prostitution, building a new church on mill property the year before his death in 1882.



LABOUR DAY PARADE IN 1898. Hastings Mill was the nucleus around which Vancouver grew up and was always a part of every civic celebration. In this image, men and women in their finery watch as horse-drawn wagons exit the mill and head south on Dunlevy. The lead wagon, just past the Alexander intersection, carries two 4' by 20' knot-free timbers to be assembled into dining tables.

However it was the company store that was the heart of the sawmill settlement. You could pick up your mail, stock up on quality merchandise and warm your hands around the stove while listening to the latest news from visitors from exotic ports of call. There were no drunks at Raymur's mill.

Thus began the cleanup of Stamp's Mill and Gastown. One of the first official acts was the name change. The mill was "christened" the more fashionable Hastings Sawmill Company, after Admiral George Fowler

Hastings, Commander of the North Pacific naval station at Esquimalt. It was a popular, if not confusing choice at the time, with Brighton, three miles to the east, already renamed Hastings Townsite. But Raymur stuck to his choice. The meeting room and library he had instituted as part of his social reform became the new Hastings Literary Institute. And the road connecting the mill to Gastown became Hastings Road (today's Alexander).

It was another official name change that would solidify the identity of Hastings Mill and the power of the mill