



VANCOUVER BURNS, 13 JUNE 1886. A map of how the fire spread based on fifty survivor accounts. Drawn by A. E. White of the Art Engraving Company, from the original sketch of Major James S. Matthews, compiled with assistance from eyewitnesses Thomas Mathews and H. George L. Schetky, 1932.

## The Great Vancouver Fire of 1886

By Jacqui Underwood

Our city is in ashes... three thousand homeless... can you send us any government aid?

THE TELEGRAM WAS A SIMPLE PLEA to Sir John A. Macdonald, Prime Minister of Canada from Vancouver's fledgling Mayor Malcolm Alexander MacLean, in the aftermath of Black Sunday, June 13, 1886. It was an infamous day in Vancouver's history. Vancouver did not burn, it was said, "It was consumed by flame." The number of dead that could be counted: twenty-one parcels of charred fragments. But for some there were no remains, they just dissolved instantly in the inferno. And since there was no accurate accounting for the population, the true number of dead could never be really determined.

Maclean had been mayor one month. Vancouver had been incorporated as a city for just over two months. The crazed clearing of the land and frantic building had begun about six months earlier. The old residents of Granville and Hastings Mill were a little bewildered. The newcomers, mostly men of British and Eastern Canadian origin had been arriving in droves since the fall of 1885 in anticipation of fortunes to be made with the coming of the railway and the expansion of the new Vancouver. Once sleepy Granville, which lay in a hollow set against the forest below today's Victory Square, bustled with surveyors and speculators, and the construction of new buildings, the lumber green, unpainted, and fresh with sap. There were plenty of new homes with new wells and new hotels, where a tall beer called a schooner could be had for five cents for thirsty dealmakers and woodsmen alike. Maple Tree Square was a hub of activity, as lots were sold and cleared. The smoke of dynamited and burning stumps permeated the air. The big question uppermost on minds: which way would the town grow, east or west of Carrall Street?

By February 1886, they got the answer. The Canadian Pacific Railway began to clear land on an old government reserve it had been granted as the "CPR townsite." It stretched from Burrard Inlet to False Creek, today's Burrard Street on the west, to the old townsite on the east. It was at this new townsite, equivalent to today's downtown, up on the hill above Victory Square where clearing began in earnest and took on mammoth proportions. It was reportedly typical 19<sup>th</sup> century clearing practice and apparently effective, but horrific by today's standards. It would prove fatal for the new city of Vancouver and its citizens. In the "bowling pin" method of clearing, smaller trees were cut halfway through, then, a huge tree dropped upon them, the larger sweeping down the smaller, like dominoes, five acres at a time, in "one great grand resounding crash." They tumbled one upon the other in a vast matted mass of pitch, moss, leaves and timber, twenty feet thick carpeting the ground. A travesty of wasted timber, it was left in wild disarray, the worst of it just above the

Roundhouse clearing on False Creek, drying for weeks in the hot early summer sun. It had all the ingredients of a gigantic fire waiting to ignite.

By that Sunday morning in June, there were pyramids of logs, stumps and roots piled high for controlled burning on the edge of the old townsite. Many were already alight and their smoke hung heavy in the streets. But the smoke of clearing fires was not unusual; it had been smoky for weeks, so people went about their business, even if the smoke was heavier that day. Meantime, out of their view, a CPR crew at the Roundhouse site was fighting a desperate battle with a clearing fire, while just to its west, that tinder-dry mass of fallen trees was getting dangerously hot. In town, people attended church and enjoyed other Sunday pastimes, not knowing hell's cauldron was brewing on the other side of the hill and the devil was about to be unleashed.

When it struck, it was with tragic swiftness and from all directions. Some say it entered from the west, some say via Carrall and the future rail yards, some say from above. Pioneer woodsman George Cary remembers the morning fighting "the fire" just above the corner of Cambie and Cordova, when a breeze from the southwest suddenly stiffened:

The wind increased to a summer's gale. Chunks of flaming wood as big as my leg were flying clear over us, and dropping in town... We did our best but at last it crossed at the corner of Cambie and Cordova. There was no time to lose. I gathered up a mother; Mrs. Irwin and her two children, from a shack on the lane behind the Sterling Hotel and started east but all Water Street was ablaze, so we turned back and scurried west down to an old float at the foot of Cambie. The tide drifted a raft near me and I grabbed it. The frantic mother said something about throwing the children into the sea; that she would rather see them drown than burn; the flames were coming right over us.

At that point, the family on the raft was rescued by a tug.

Alderman W. H. Gallagher saw the fire as early as ten that morning heading down Drake near Homer (CPR roundhouse site), west of False Creek, but it took a



THE MORNING AFTER. Fire refugees found safety across False Creek at the foot of Mount Pleasant on the New Road. Word came by galloper that food and blankets were on the way from New Westminster, so Mayor Mclean asked the blackened, sweaty mass of homeless to assemble and wait. It was midnight when two wagon loads arrived, brought by the Knights of Labour, a pioneer trade union. Parcels were distributed in total darkness save a few candles. By morning, a refugees' bivouac was set up. The man in the centre, with his foot on the keg is Robert Robertson, while the man lying on a blanket, reading a book is Walter E. Graveley.

couple of hours before it reached Vancouver. His road company crews augmented CPR crews and townsite men who fought the good fight right through until after lunch time. Gallagher decided to head into town and secure company books and men's wages at the office on Hastings Road (Alexander Street). Percival and Gallagher had been hired to build the roadbed for the railway from Carrall to the proposed CPR roundhouse.

Through the office window, I saw a rabble of people running down Hastings Road from the direction of Deighton House (Water and Carrall); Gassy Jack's place... I went out on the road and walked towards Gassy Jack's but by the time I got there the Sunnyside Hotel across the street, built partly over the inlet, was a mass of flame, and, before I got back to the office I had just left—a mere block away—that was on fire too... One

huge flame, one hundred feet long burst from the Deighton Hotel leapt high over the famous Maple Tree and swallowed up the building at Alexander and Powell, where now stands the Europe Hotel.

Before I left the camp on False Creek near the foot of Smythe and Cambie, I could see that the fire was out of control. It had gained such momentum as to completely obscure the sky; the air was just one mass of fiery flame driven before a strong northwest gale. The remainder of our men were forced out of the camp and driven into False Creek. Three men who gallantly volunteered to help fight the fire were never heard from again... nor did we find their bodies.

Eye witness accounts suggest the fiery attack on Vancouver was coming from front and flank. That the combined force of windstorm and a terrific upward suction of heated air, created a firestorm common to

forest fires. The buildings simply melted as if in a furnace. Indeed one story of the heat has a man driving a horse and wagon, caught on Carrall Street between Water and Cordova; man and horse were cremated alive in the centre of the street; two iron tires and some ashes were all that was left of the man, horse and wagon.

Another cites the burning wooden sidewalk on Hastings Road: as people fled toward the safety of Hastings Mill, they had to leave the wooden walkway and take to the road because the fire travelled faster than a man could run.

As for Gallagher he and others waded deep into the safety of the filthy harbor:

The heat was so intense that we gasped; we had to stoop down to the surface of the water to get our breath. There was a current of cool air... between the heat and the smoke and the surface of the water; we breathed it and it saved us.

It was all over in 45 minutes. By two o'clock that fateful Sunday afternoon historic Granville had vanished, save a few perimeter buildings. Miraculously, the town's main economic force of twenty years, the Hastings Mill had been saved when the wind suddenly died and the fire stopped. The mill became the town's first lifeline, opening its store to serve as an emergency centre to supply food and treat the burn victims. Mill manager R. H. Alexander later offered all the lumber in the yard, free of charge, for rebuilding.

Help also came from across the inlet, by steamer, tug and canoe from the Mission Reserve and Moodyville, whose citizens acted as soon as they saw Vancouver in flames. Bedraggled survivors who had jumped in the harbor also found refuge on boats and anything afloat, including the hulk of the *Robert Kerr*. And as the day wore on, at the urging of Mayor Maclean, fire victims on the False Creek side made their way to the refugee camp in the forest on the new road (Kingsway) at the foot of Mount Pleasant hill, to await aid from New Westminster.

The morning after, midst the black desolation and sifting through the rubble for the pitiful remains of the dead, the pioneer spirit was not lost. The newest hotel on Carrall, the Tremont Hotel, which had burned to the ground, gained the distinction of being the first business to re-open. They offered liquid encouragement, beer from an open-air bar. Vancouver was back! In five weeks, the city would rise from the ashes.



REMAINS OF THE DAY. A 1920 letter from Mrs. Jessie Ross addressed to Hiram Perry McCraney Esquire, 3350 Cypress Street, Vancouver, accompanied the remains of a melted dessert knife, spoon and forks, as a donation to the Vancouver Pioneers Association. The "trifling relics", as she called them, became one of the earliest exhibits of the Old Hastings Mill Store Museum. Survivor of the Great Fire, Jessie and her young son were pulled from the flaming Sunny Side Hotel and saved from certain death. One of the men who rescued them would later become legend as lifeguard Joe Forte. After the holocaust was over, Jessie and, fellow survivor, husband, Arthur Wellington Ross, sifted through the ash of his Water Street real estate office. Of all their worldly belongings, Jessie could only find these charred household remnants. The pioneer couple was among the first to rebuild and later moved into the first Hotel Vancouver.