

Mary Isabella Rogers Reminisces

A first-hand account of Vancouver in 1886

READING ABOUT THE EARLY DISCOVERIES made me think of my first visit to Burrard Inlet in February 1886. We came from Victoria to the site of the proposed Pacific terminus for the Canadian Pacific Railway. There was no Vancouver then on the inlet, only a little settlement around the Hastings Saw Mill, a few shacks, considerable clearing, and on the north shore of the inlet, the Moodyville Saw Mill.

My father, mother and I had reached Victoria only a few weeks earlier. We had left England in July 1885, crossed the Atlantic in the Allen liner *Peruvian*, stayed in Montreal with Uncle Richard's family while my father visited several places before deciding where to settle. He finally crossed the continent, part of the trip being on horseback, riding in company with Arthur W. Ross, the Member of Parliament for Winnipeg, through the Kicking Horse Pass, over the uncompleted railway through the Rockies. He decided on Victoria for our future home and returned to Montreal for my mother and me. Then we set out by CPR as far as Winnipeg, from where we went to the States to spend Christmas with the Rennys on their Minnesota farm and to visit Uncle Sandy and family in Fergus Falls. We then went on to Chicago and by the Union Pacific to San Francisco where we boarded the steamer *Umatilla* for Victoria. We stayed first at the Driard Hotel and then took a small house off Menzies Street on Simcoe Street.

We lost no time in making the journey to the mainland to see the proposed townsite. It was an overnight trip to Burrard Inlet so we slept comfortably on the *SS Princess Louise* before spending the day exploring the site that was covered with huge felled trees. There was no means of transportation and all this fine timber was burned where it lay on the ground and the air was thick with its smoke. We clambered over fallen logs in company with W. Thomas Sorby, the architect, to see where the CPR was planning to build their hotel. After a tiring smoky day, we returned to Victoria again sleeping all night on the boat.

I remember well the fight in the legislature over the change of name when Sir William van Horne insisted on Granville becoming Vancouver against the strenuous objections of Vancouver Island. That was in April 1886 and on 13 June 1886 came the fire.

On 4 July 1886 we again visited the inlet this time landing at Port Moody to meet the first transcontinental train. It was Sunday and a great crowd had come over on the steamer *Yosemite* that was dangerously overcrowded. Before leaving Victoria at midnight on Saturday, a spectacular fire destroyed a warehouse and store at the NE corner of Fort and Government Streets. Many of the *Yosemite* passengers, who with Captain John Irving had been celebrating the Fourth of July on Beacon Hill, rushed ashore to the fire and it was a very excited crowd—incidentally Captain Irving was in a kilt—that boarded the boat. The conditions on the boat were chaotic with no place to sleep and no food to be had for the majority of the passengers. However, we arrived safely at Port Moody and when the train rolled in it was welcomed in turn to the terminus by the Reeve of Port Moody and then to the real terminus by Mayor McLean of Vancouver to the fresh water terminus by the Mayor of New Westminster and finally by stout Mayor Fell to the Pacific terminus of Victoria. The premier Alec Davie had come over on the *Yosemite*, [as well as] Colonel Wolfenden, the Queen's printer, to welcome his brother arriving direct from England.

In Vancouver everywhere there was excitement and real estate speculation. My father bought some lots on Richards Street opposite where the Holy Rosary Cathedral now stands and some on Powell Street. On Richards Street, he built two houses that were still in existence until very recently. He stayed at the Sunny Side Hotel, most of which was built on piles over water. Sanitation was simple and in the bedroom you opened the window and dumped the slops into the harbour.

Altogether, the twelve months from July 1885 to July 1886 were an adventurous year for a 16/17-year-old schoolgirl. Crossing the Atlantic and seeing a huge iceberg in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, a smallpox epidemic in Montreal with the militia called out to quell anti-vaccination riots in the French quarter, part of our train wrecked by a spread rail north of Lake Superior in mid-winter, and forty below for Christmas on the prairies, the sudden change to blossoming spring in California, an attack of rheumatic fever in the Palace Hotel in San Francisco, arriving in Victoria limping with a couple of sticks. Then seeing a new city emerging from the forest, sewing and knitting for the refugees from the fire, and finally the arrival of the first through train. It was truly a wonderful year for me.



Mary Isabella Rogers née Angus, married to Benjamin Tingley Rogers of Rogers Sugar fame in 1892, frequently travelled abroad with her husband to engage in functions of high society. Her uncle, Richard Bladworth Angus, was the president of the Hudson's Bay Company's Bank of Montreal while also serving as a director for the Canadian Pacific Railway.



A SILVER SUGAR BOWL. Complete with a squirrel eating an acorn, this piece was a part of Mrs. Rogers's cutlery. In the early 1890s, as a young married woman, she wrote her memories of one teenage year.