Father of Vancouver

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THOUGH HIS NAME will forever be tied to Vancouver, David Oppenheimer was born half a world away in Blieskastel, Germany. The fourth son of a large Jewish merchant family with ten children, David was only 14 in 1848 when political turmoil caused the Oppenheimers to leave Germany for the US. They briefly settled in New Orleans, where David went to bookkeeping school and worked in a general store. Soon after, word started filtering across the country that gold had been discovered in California's Sierra Nevada mountains. Ever the opportunists, David and his older brother Charles set sail for San Francisco via the Isthmus of Panama. They arrived on the West Coast in February of 1851 and within a year had been joined by their youngest brother, Isaac, and were working as provisions traders in Placer County.

In 1858 the Oppenheimers heard rumours of gold being found in British Columbia's Fraser Canyon. With the California rush waning, David and his brothers saw another golden business opportunity in the making. They sent Charles ahead to Victoria, the jumping-off point for those heading to the interior and the only place to buy permits and supplies in the region. By 1858 he had opened a wholesale provisions company and was soon joined by David, Isaac, and another brother, Godfrey.

The Oppenheimers weren't content to rest on their laurels, though. Thousands had come to the Fraser looking for gold, yet returning to Victoria to stock up on supplies was both dangerous and expensive. In 1859 David and his brothers opened a second store in Yale, a natural choice, as it was the highest navigable point on the Fraser River before it entered the canyon. Their wholesale provisions store, Oppenheimer Bros., was located on Front Street and became a popular gathering place for those heading to and from the diggings.

Fortune seekers followed the Fraser north from Yale, eventually hitting the jackpot in 1861 with a strike in the Williams Creek area. Barkerville sprang into existence, quickly becoming the biggest boomtown north of San Francisco and west of Chicago. In 1862 the brothers set up another location there and in a few years had warehouses in Hope and Fisherville as well, though Yale remained the centre of their business. David ran the Yale location and became known as a popular host and a staunch protector of local interests.

The 800-kilometre trip between the Yale and Barkerville stores was notoriously dangerous, but was also a necessary requirement for the Oppenheimers' success. Their pack train was the largest in the region at the time, with 157 mules. It took the train a month to travel from one store to the other, as it had to contend with the elements and grizzlies, and often had to double-back to evade robbery attempts along the way. Because of the Oppenheimers' familiarity with the journey, Charles was hired at one point to help construct a portion of the Cariboo Wagon Road connecting the two towns. Much of the Trans-Canada Highway follows the same route today.

Though business was booming, fire was an ever present and very real danger on the frontier. The Oppenheimers first discovered just how real in 1868, when a fast moving fire swept through Barkerville, levelling the store in minutes. Though they had lost over $100,000 in goods, the disaster was met with immediate action from David, and he made the first of what would be many civic donations. Determined not to have the tragedy repeat itself when the store was rebuilt, he headed to San Francisco and purchased a fire wagon that he then donated to create the first Williams Creek Fire Brigade.

By 1872 business at the Barkerville location had slowed enough that David and Isaac decided to sell it, focusing their energy again on Yale. In 1874 their worst fears were realized when the Yale store burned to the ground. They quickly rebuilt the store with brick. Around the same time, David protested freight charges on the Fraser, which he deemed monopolistic. He continued his focus on improving transport in the region in 1880, and partnered with Andrew Onderdonk to raise money for the construction of several challenging stretches of the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

When fire burned through the wooden roof and gutted the contents of the Oppenheimers' store in 1881, Yale was no longer the booming town it had been. David and Isaac headed back to Vancouver Island, where they opened a second Victoria store on Wharf Street in early 1882. However, David's thoughts were focused on the mainland. He had watched the approaching completion of the CPR closely and had started to acquire premium plots of land in the Granville area as early as 1878. In 1884 he purchased even more land in what would become Vancouver, and was part of the group that convinced the
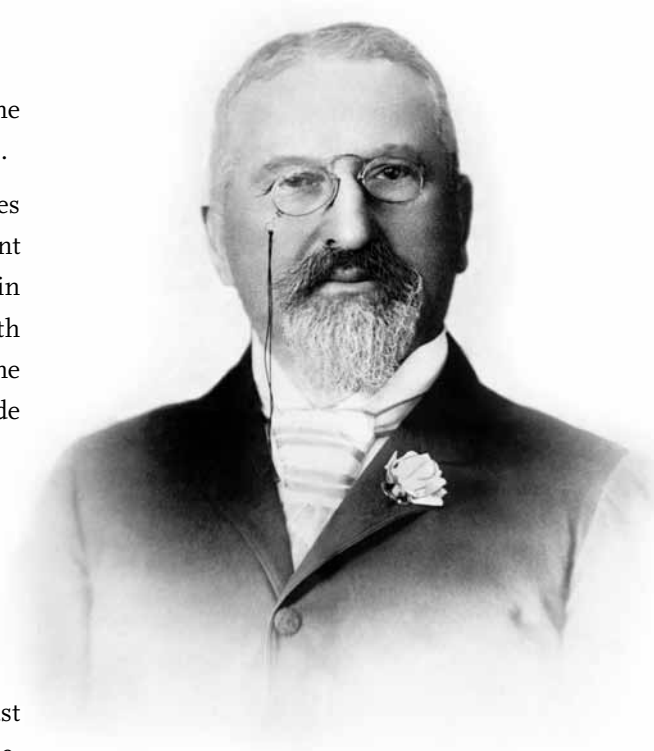
David Oppenheimer, the city's second mayor, eventually came to be affectionately known as the "Father of Vancouver."

CPR to extend the terminus west from Port Moody by donating 175 acres of their own land. Seeing the potential of the area, David and Isaac relocated to Vancouver in 1885 and decided to build a permanent brick warehouse.

When the great fire swept through Vancouver in 1886, construction was underway on the new building at the corner of Powell and Columbia Streets, and most of the city and the Oppenheimers' temporary store were destroyed. Not deterred by yet another setback, the brothers continued construction, and when the store was finished in July of 1887, it was the first brick building in Vancouver.

In Yale and Barkerville David had shown his propensity for civic involvement, petitioning for local interests and playing an active role in both community and regional development. In the fledgling town of Vancouver, that interest blossomed into a passion. David turned his knowledge of business towards helping the city grow. He served as an alderman on the first city council, which held meetings in his office until the construction of the new city hall—which was being built on land he donated—was finished. He gained popularity in the community for his work as chairman of the city's finance committee. In November of 1887 he was named the first president of the Vancouver Board of Trade, and just a month later was elected as the city's second mayor.

David had a particular vision for the city he believed Vancouver could be and was determined to make his vision a reality. From 1888 to 1891 he served four consecutive terms as mayor, with no pay for his duties. He was passionate about making the city the international port of call he felt was vital to the success of the province—and the Dominion of Canada. As the first president of the Vancouver Board of Trade, he wrote about fostering trade with Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and of the fundamental need to both import and export goods. He worked with the CPR to establish direct shipping routes between Vancouver, Japan and Australia. He founded the British Columbia Fruit Growers Association in 1888 with the hope of supporting the growers of the region so that BC-grown fruit would be exported to all reaches of the world, and the exotic fruits of the world imported in turn.

As mayor he was responsible for creating the city water works and lighting company, as well as the fire department, paved streets, sidewalks, and the sewage system. He initiated the city's first transportation system by creating the Vancouver Electric Railway and Light Company, and the Westminster and Vancouver Tramway. The first Cambie Street Bridge and the first Granville Bridge were opened while he was in office. He opened Stanley Park in 1888 and established the Parks Board.

David often invested his own money and much of his personal time on projects that benefited the community, such as the construction of a public wharf. He served as mayor without pay and donated his own land for schools and parks. He was involved in the creation of the city's YMCA, the Alexandra Orphanage, the British Columbia Exhibition Association, and the Vancouver Club.

Though English was his second language, David was a prolific and competent communicator, and he wrote extensively on his vision for Vancouver. To attract settlers to the city, he authored several pamphlets outlining the potential of the region for distribution in London and the United States. He has often been called the "Father of Vancouver" for his contributions. On his retirement from the position of mayor in early 1892 due to his failing health, the *Daily Colonist* ran the following:

> Mr. Oppenheimer has been for four years Mayor of Vancouver, and he has served his fellow citizens faithfully and efficiently.... He has watched over [Vancouver's] infancy—has, as it were, superintended the laying of its foundation. He has fostered its growth, which has been unprecedentedly rapid, and has very materially aided its wonderful development. Such supervision as he has exercised required, in order to do it well, all the best qualities of an able man of business, and Mr. Oppenheimer has done it well. It is fortunate for Vancouver that it was able to avail itself of the services of such a man as David Oppenheimer at the most critical stage of its existence. It will take time for even its citizens fully to appreciate all that he has done for them and their city.

David Oppenheimer was twice married. He married his first wife Sarah in 1857. She died at age 40 in 1880. This marriage produced no children. David married is second wife, Julia Walter of New York, in San Francisco in 1883. They had a daughter Flora. Julia died in a tragic accident in March 1897, and David, who had been sick off and on for years, died 9 months later on 31 December 1897.

To best get a sense of David Oppenheimer's dedication to the city and province, one need look no further than the following excerpt from the *Vancouver Daily World* that was published shortly after his death:

> He was not all things to all men, he was the same thing to all men; genial, honest, and kind-hearted to a fault. The voice of sorrow never failed to win his keenest sympathy, and the voice of suffering had not to call twice to him for help. Yet with all his large-heartedness, he was practical to a degree and could grasp a business proposition as clearly as any man living. That he took an almost fatherly pride in Vancouver has been exemplified time and again. He saw into the future further than the ordinary eye could reach, and planned and built accordingly. Even as he lay on his deathbed and felt that the end could not be very far away, he said he had no fear of death but that he would like … to see Vancouver enjoy the prosperity that he had always said would be hers and which he felt was now at hand.

Another article called David the best friend that Vancouver ever had, but the same could be said as vice versa—that Vancouver, in some ways, was his closest and dearest friend, who he saw great things for in the future. The company David and his brothers founded in 1858 is still in business. Today it is called The Oppenheimer Group, a marketer of over 100 varieties of fresh produce grown in 26 countries to retail, wholesale and foodservice customers across North America. It has grown into a half-billion-dollar company with offices throughout the US, Canada and Chile, selling 40 million boxes of produce annually—four billion individual pieces of fruit. Though it has grown into an international powerhouse with grower partners around the world, Oppenheimer's roots are still and always will be firmly planted in British Columbia. It has been named the oldest continually operating business in the province by the Vancouver Historical Society, and it celebrated its 150th anniversary in 2008. The 12th of July was named "David Oppenheimer Day" in the City of Vancouver. A ceremony was held to celebrate the event in Stanley Park near David's memorial statue. Members of the Oppenheimer family, as well as delegates from the city, the Parks Board, and staff of the Oppenheimer Group attended the ceremony.

Though memories fade over time, it is easy to see the legacy of David Oppenheimer today. One just has to look around oneself, at the city he loved so much, which continues to thrive more than a century after his death.

To commemorate his contributions to the city, a memorial statue of David Oppenheimer was placed at the entrance to Stanley Park in 1911.