

Hotels and Pubs of Nanaimo

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[unknown speaker – W.Barraclough?]

An address, by Mrs. W. McGirr

Presented before Nanaimo Historical Society April 25th, 1967 on hotels and pubs of Nanaimo

Recorded by W. Barraclough

[unknown speaker]

Well, Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I've been asked to introduce who I consider to be one of our youngest members, I say this because of her enthusiasm that she has shown for many years in preserving the history of Nanaimo. I believe she is one of our charter members, certainly one of our very early members, and over the years she has shown a great interest in everything pertaining to the Historical Society and to the preservation of the history of this area. I believe she comes of a pioneer family and this family was intimately connected with a very large industry in the city of Nanaimo in the early days, and even today is one of the industries which helps to support our province. I refer of course to Mrs. McGirr, who is going to speak on the early pubs, shall I use that word?, of Nanaimo.

Mrs. W. McGirr

Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I propose to take you this evening to see in imagination many old buildings, particularly old pubs and saloons, which were a large feature of old Nanaimo. We may get tired walking, but there will be plenty of stops, so just stagger on and be comfortable.

We shall begin our long walk from the early city limits of Nanaimo. That is at the corner of Haliburton and Needham Street. Here we see our first hotel. A large, wooden building of the regulation type, high, and narrow. With a long bar, a brass rail to rest your foot, cuspidors, and a large mirror in the background. This hotel was built in 1889 by a Mr. Cuffalo, and named the Italian Hotel. It boasted the first outside bowling alley in Nanaimo. Still on the same site, but enlarged and modernized, it is now the Columbus.

Just a few ... sorry ... just a few feet north, and on the opposite side of the street, was a much older building, with a long veranda also across its second story. Operated before 1881 by a member of the Baker family of *Princess Royal* fame, and called the Dew Drop. Changing hands a number of times and being modernized, its name became the Patricia, which it still is. On these two verandas, judges and friends sat to watch horse racing, which ran on this long, straight stretch of Haliburton Street.

Three blocks north, we stop at a large and imposing building, the Balmoral. At first it was built against a rock, and had many money difficulties. The first occupants taking over before it was finished. Finally, after many years, it has become a dignified, large, and successful hotel, and has kept its original name.

Let us hurry north to Crace, and around the corner to Victoria Crescent, where we will certainly be in the pub business. Here we come to a large, brick saloon. Built in 1889, opened in '90. To begin, to being with, three-storys high. One more being added after Prohibition. The entrance to the bar was through a swing door on the corner. At one time, there was a splendid dining room in this hotel. It stood empty and forlorn for several years until the city took it over and in 1958 it was torn down to lengthen the Terminal Highway. It was always called the Crescent.

A few feet north, and facing the Crescent, were two very ancient pubs, leaning against each other. They were both advertised long before 1874, both narrow and high and of wooden construction. They were in those years, two of the three saloons out of only seven buildings on this little block. They were named the Identical and the Oriental. Sometimes people would call them, just oh, that's [Peck's?] Saloon. Years past, they were torn down. The Eagle took their place, and once again, the name has been changed to the Terminal.

6:11

The third mentioned on this street at that time was the Provincial, also high, of wood, and the usual veranda on the second story. This one ... [?] ... 1881 and sandwiched in between two small stores.

Within a few feet, we reach another large, brick hotel, the Grand. The Grand Hotel bought and used a groceteria part of Eatons store in 1923. Finally torn down, and all this property has now become Eatons store.

Jump across once more to the opposite side, facing us, we come to the Queen's. Also all brick. This building has been much changed. It was built in 1890 by a former mayor of Nanaimo. At that time it was called the International. Very ornate, and in earlier times, down below, meetings were held, and dances. This was called the Sump. And I understand, that at certain turns of the tide, the smell was not too sweet.

In the early days, from here, we would have to cross a long, wooden bridge and once again be in a block of old pubs on Commercial Street. Our first stop will be at the Britannia. A very old, wooden building, and just about touching where Woolworth's store now is. Tall, and also with a sight-seeing veranda, burned down and never rebuilt as a hotel.

A short walk north, and we arrive at one of the oldest sites of hotels, the Nanaimo. Somewhat as you see it today, although, a veranda ran along one side and right round to the back. This building was rebuilt after the fire of 1894. And along the same lines. Boasting at one time a 80 foot flag pole in the front. It has kept the same name. It had many owners, and in the beginning was built by a member of the Gough family, also of *Princess Royal* fame, and built in the early '70s.

Another of the very old hotels we must stop at for a few minutes, if we're not too tired, was on the site of the Walls and Bradshaw Building, which is just now being demolished. Here in the very early '70s was a boarding house. It was burned down, and in its place, the Royal Hotel, a wooden building, with a large upper veranda, rooms, etc., and what they call a barber's, a shaving saloon was built. But in September 1894, along with the Nanaimo Hotel, and many others, it was also burned down. At one time, this hotel was classed as one of our leading hotels and it has been told us that Sir John A. Macdonald stayed there when on his visit to put the last peg in our railway. This building was never rebuilt as a hotel. I have here the names of half a dozen different proprietors, and they, a few of them you may remember. Watkins, Adams, Lawrence, Beveridge, Wolfe, and Dunbar. Some of the names may be familiar.

If we cross here, to where Charlie York has a store, we see what once one of the three oldest of our saloons. Once called the Miners' Exchange, or Retreat, it later became the Central. And advertised as being close to the steamboat landing. A vestige of this old building still stands. A *Princess Royal* passenger also built this one, by the name of Webb. He also became an Alderman of our city.

11:26

Still travelling north, on Commercial Street, we come what was once the Gibson Block. Recently renovated into one-story business houses. Built in the early '90s, of brick, and three-stories high, this hotel was called the Doon. With the large dining room, which was run by a Bennett family for many years. One, once housed the CPR telegraph and ticket office, and a store that became the first Woolworth's.

A few feet north and we reach another corner door type. And it ... something like an English inn, the old Commercial. A large brick addition was added on the west side facing Bastion Street. The corner saloon, was moved, it was [changed?] and housed at one time the Bank of Nova Scotia, and now a men's clothing store. This section still retains its original shape, but in 1880, built in 1880 and run by several well-known citizens, this property was at one time owned by the Dunsmuirs, later by Sabiston and Wilcox. It has had several small fires.

Shall we get off Commercial Street for a walk around the block to Skinner Street, where we stagger into the Palace Hotel, also a substantial brick hotel, and opened in March

1889. Several well-known citizens have managed this one. For some years, it housed The *Herald* building and other businesses. In bygone days it had a very fine dining room, and a good reputation. This dining room is now the ladies [parlour?] and the building is now in the hands of the Mottishaw family, who also had it many years ago.

Moving north on Skinner, we arrive at the Capitol Theatre, on whose property stood the quaint, story and a half [brown?] frame, the swinging door on the corner. A typical old English inn, called The Old Flag Inn. We hear of this one before 1874, then owned and operated by Pawson and Jerome. Mr. Pawson was very substantial and civic minded citizen. He owned a large block on Fitzwilliam Street, a [home there?], one time an Alderman, became the mayor, president of the hospital society, after which one of the wards in the old hospital was named. John Pawson Ward. One of our earlier doctors, is said to have written his memoirs in the back of this little inn.

As we cross Bastion Street Bridge and climb the steep Fitzwilliam Street hill, to Selby, we shall enter another substantial three-story brick building, also with a corner entrance. This is the Occidental. Built by the Fiddick family in 1887, presumably to get the railroad trade which had just opened. Its shape and name has never changed, although one story has been added.

Our long walk, takes us back to Bastion, where the Capitol and Royal Bank parking lot is. Here was the Lotus, a small, stuccoed building, built where stood in the earlier days a temperance house. This was a, about 1908, it was remodeled. The Lotus was burned down in 1964.

On the corner lot, built in 1898, was a frame hotel, The Vendome. It became a clothing store, became the Royal Bank in 1918, with a rooming house above, and now a parking lot.

Rounding this corner, and travelling north, we reach the Wilson Hotel. Built in 1893. I understand that one of the 1854 arrivals, Thomas Hawks, you've heard the name, built on this little, on this property, the first large log house in Nanaimo, that is of any size. It was torn down to build the Wilson Hotel. Also on this same spot stood a tiny little saloon on four poles I believe, or planks of some sort. This hotel had a fine appearance and was our leading hotel at one time, also run by different well known citizens. Destroyed by fire, partially, in 1930, and now used for various business purposes.

[17:22](#)

Back to Church Street, and facing the old Bank of Commerce, was the Nanaimo Opera House. Our older citizens were just proud of this fine building. Built by the late John Mahrer in 1888 and 9 it had a wonderful history. Opened with a grand ball in November

the 16th in the same year. This building had a large auditorium, two galleries, four spectator boxes, dressing rooms, etc. A very large, long bar. A mirror, brass rails, and there were always cheese and crackers in a bowl on the bar. [background laughter]

In this building old plays, legitimate and vaudeville, fights, political meetings, dances, bazaars, and it was also the original movie house. Many years later there came a great change. The saloon became the Shades. It was taken over, it became part of the Plaza, and now in its place, we have the Shoreline, which also [annexed?] the Windsor, one of our very small, old, wooden hotels, separated from the opera house by a very narrow, dark alley. It also had several small fires at different times. In 1934, became part of the Plaza, as I say, and in 1964, this large site, all the way to Front Street, including the Green Block, is a large and palatial hotel, fronting on Church and Front Street.

Still walking along the west side of Front Street, in 1887, we would have come to one more brick, ornate hotel. Facing the harbour, it had a beautiful view. This was the Globe. Enlarged some, under the new front, it still kept its original name. Built by a stone mason named Alec Henderson.

As we turn the corner of Comox Road, known to us at that time as [Praeger's?] Hill, we soon reach the Newcastle. The one we see now was not the first. As some feet further on, a whitewashed, shuttered wooden building, of 1876, stood a long time. A bit of it still shows if you look above the cafe to the, on the same site.

Here, for a time, our wanderings cease, as, it was rather a job to get across to Townsite. We'll have a moment's rest and then we cross the old, wooden Newcastle-Townsite Bridge. Cross through a trail, and a rough road, we come to Rosehill Avenue, where stood a large, square, wooden building, the Mount View. Burned down in 1927.

21:01

Still travelling along our road, a rough road at that time I imagine, towards Departure Bay, we come to Peck's Synagogue, as it was called in the early days. That building was burned down in 1878 and the new one ever since has been called the Pink 'un, overlooking the channel. It ... has ... is not there now, it has been taken right away and been replaced and in its place there is a motel, the Buccaneer, if any of you are passing, you'll know the site of the old Pink 'un was where the Buccaneer Hotel is.

Travelling on to Departure Bay, and down the hill to the right, was Harper's Saloon, known by ships all the way to San Francisco and, I presume, around the world. Built on the water's edge, of wood, and torn down, I just hadn't the date, I ... haven't ... been able quite get the date, but it's not too long ago.

We won't go any further, but if anyone were on their way up north, up the Island, there were plenty of stops, so, one every few blocks, something like the service stations are nowadays I think.

As children growing up in Nanaimo we had a wonderful place on the waterfront, for years. But here, in 1927, and close to the post office, our first hotel for many, many years was built by citizens, a very fine asset to our city, and now being renovated, it is the Hotel Malaspina, coming up to date.

In 1962, we had our second large and modern one, on an entirely new site, The Tally-Ho Travelodge, just by Pearson Bridge. This property once housed a tanning factory, a large mill, a gasworks, and a private home.

Thus, we have in our centennial year, travelled many years back, and we have come to the end of our long walk. Having a peek into the past, and a glimpse of the future. The old saloons were a part of our heritage, where many questions of the day were settled. Partly, I judge, as a friendly meeting place, and, also there were so few places to congregate. Let us leave them, and remember them, as part of Nanaimo's growing up.

[Applause]

[Recording ends]