

OBITUARY

MAJOR JAMES SKITT MATTHEWS, V.D.

Major James Skitt Matthews, City Archivist of Vancouver, died on October 1st, 1970, at the age of 92. The following tribute is taken from obituaries in the Vancouver Sun and Vancouver Province.¹

Throughout his career as archivist - he took on the job without pay in 1933 - he fought for his archives and an official building to house them. But before he died, he knew it was the intention of the city's centennial committee to build an addition to the Centennial Museum and the wing would be named the Major Matthews Archives.

Major Matthews, crusty, impatient with those who didn't understand the significance of the city's record, and invariably right in disputes about the city's history, refused to retire at 83, and kept at his work until last year.

His archives are at present in storage in Vancouver Public Library, having moved there from their original home in the old market building at Maine and Hastings, to the ninth floor of city hall. That was why he refused to retire at 83. He said he would quit on condition that a suitable building was provided for the priceless collection of 10,000 photographs and 10,000 docketts and other memorabilia he had collected through the years. He also said the city would have to replace him with a qualified successor.

For 30 years he had fought a series of battles with a succession of city councils and civic officials over the collection which he valued at \$1 million. And he earned the respect of his opponents.

Before the Major dedicated himself to the often-thankless task of archivist, the history of Vancouver was mainly locked away in the memories of the city's pioneers and strewn around hundreds of attics and closets.

The Major's love of collecting went back a long way - to Wales, where he was born, and England, where he was educated.

He arrived in Vancouver in 1898, having travelled in New Zealand after leaving England.

He was one of the original employees of the Imperial Oil Company and he sold the first can of gas to the first automobile owner in B. C. It was his idea to open an automobile service station, and the station was the first in North America.

As the years went by and his collection mounted, Major Matthews became more and more interested in a permanent archives.

He finally got it started in a tiny room in the market building, which he had to clean up before he could store his records. He was without official status or pay then. Gradually, he overcame civic indifference and was allotted space in the city hall. In 1953, he was recognized as a freeman of the city.

¹ with the kind permission of the Editors.

The brusque manner that became his trademark was probably developed during a military career that began in 1903 when he joined the Duke of Connaught's Own Rifles here.

He was in command of the regiment in 1913 and was decorated during service overseas in the First World War.

In Victoria, Provincial Archivist Willard Ireland, called Major Matthews "the grand old man" of historical preservation in the Vancouver area.

The present generation fondly regarded the Major as an eccentric who deserved the civic indulgence he was so often given. Such single-mindedness, of course, was bound to become eccentricity. It drove the archivist to many battles with the city council over archives appropriations, accommodation, ownerships and so on.

Often the Major threatened to leave, but never did. Mayors and councils were irritated to the point of firing him, but they never did. As the years went by, it became plain that the city and the Major belonged to each other and that divorce was unthinkable.

And with each year the Major worked with increasing fury to complete the record he began so many years ago. He, above all, sensed the passing of time and his diminishing energy to cope with the task that remained. In the last few years, it became a race against the hours, with the archivist angrily resisting those who urged him to rest instead of burning the midnight oil over old manuscripts and ancient anecdotes.

Now the long love affair is over. Only the grave could separate the Major from the great passion of his life - the city whose history he served so faithfully.

DR. WILFRED I. SMITH, DOMINION ARCHIVIST/L'ARCHIVISTE FEDERAL.

On behalf of the members of the Archives Section, the executive would like to extend its sincere congratulations and best wishes to Dr. Wilfred I. Smith on his appointment as Dominion Archivist. Appointed on 23 December, 1970, Dr. Smith is the fifth person to hold this distinguished post since the founding of the Public Archives of Canada almost a century ago.

After doing graduate work in history at Acadia University and the University of Minnesota, Dr. Smith entered the Public Archives of Canada in 1950. He has been Chief of the Manuscript Division 1963-64; Director of the Historical Branch 1965-68; and acting Dominion Archivist since Dr. Lamb's retirement. He served as chairman of the Archives Section 1968-69, and is a member of the Council of the Society of American Archivists. At its meeting last Fall in Washington, Dr. Smith was elected a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists.

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