

## Nanaimo Historical Society Fonds

Series 2 Sound Recordings: Tape 48 a, b and c

Dr. Williams - Meeting held January 20th, 1981 to discuss the three generations of Captain Yates

Transcribed by Carol Hill, April/May, 2008

[Unidentified Speaker] The subject of tonight's topic: the Captain Yates story.

I phoned Dr. Williams up recently to find a little bit more about this. He said actually there are three Captain Yates. Three generations of Captain Yates. The middle one, who is I believe 98 years old, lives in the Hammond Bay area so and there is this gentleman's father who began his seafaring days in Prince Edward Island at the end of the last century and there is a son of this 98 year old one, another Captain Yates who is still carrying on the seafaring tradition. I am starting to lose my voice and my breath so I will let you take over from here Dr. Williams.

[Speaker: Dr. Seriol Williams]

It is going to be difficult to get back to windjammer days when we have had such exciting news today with the release of the hostages and then the inauguration and so on. If you notice people sort of dozy while I get too long winded.

We will ring the ship's bell.

You should ring the ship's bell. Anyway, when I was a lad here in Nanaimo, my favourite place to go was to Gabriola Island to the Griffin's Farm on school holidays and this entailed going down to the Farmer's Landing which was down in front of the Bastion and next to Hirst's Wharf and there one would take the tiny launch, not more than probably 20 feet in length, that took the farmers back and forward with their produce to the north end of Gabriola Island. It just happened that the fishery patrol boat that particular time, the Alcedo was berthed at the Farmer's Landing and any growing boy is always thinking about his stomach so I would wander over to the Alcedo and Mr. Stedman, who was the cook on board, always had a piece of pie for me and Captain Yates, who was the master of the boat, always welcomed me aboard. And also on the way down to the Farmer's Landing, I always passed the Yates home, which was on the southwest corner of Fitzwilliam and Wallace. It was a lovely yellow, framed house and it was prominent too because of the stone retaining wall and the long flight of steps up to the bank where the house was located. Incidentally, I usually stopped at the Wilkinson's Blacksmith Shop at the end of the bridge because when they were shoeing horses there was always a spare horseshoe about which we would pierce through cork and then with a few feathers we would make darts out of it. After a long period of absence from Nanaimo, I was glad when I came back to find out that Captain Yates was still well and alive and happy to notice that he was located on [Planta Road?] a high bluff that overlooked the Gulf of Georgia from which he could see the small craft and steamers come and go and also note the moods of the sea on which he had spent so much of his life. When I was asked by Pamela [Mar] and Henry [Poikonen] if I would consider to speak to you, I considered several subjects. Then one day, when I was out on the town with my friend, young at heart - [Robin Whally?], we were

probably going to the church. We were talking about going to the 96 birthday of Captain Yates a couple of years ago. It occurred to both of us well why not discuss the Captain Yates story at the coming session of the Historical Society. Now the story of this family covers an important and interesting period in the history of Canada and the Pacific Northwest. It is a story that has its roots in Prince Edward Island and it is romantic in the salty drama of life at sea.

It involves three master mariners, captains of ships traversing the oceans of the world and involved in the trade and commerce of many ports. And most importantly for us, the Port of Nanaimo.

I have had a unique experience in dealing with elderly people and I must say that in interviewing Captain Yates at age 98, I have found him to possess a most remarkable memory, more than any of the many people of his age that I have known. This is my first attempt at putting together a paper for the Historical Society so I hope you will pardon my inept presentation and my many shortcomings.

We sat down comfortably in front of the window looking over the Gulf and he started talking about Prince Edward Island and his father who was then Captain. I never think of Prince Edward Island and the Bay of Chaleur without thinking about Jacques Cartier and so, as my part of the conversation, I told him about my visit to St. [Malo?]. This happened about 20 years ago when I was on a brief visit to Paris and I decided that I would make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Cartier so I took an early morning train for St. Malo. We passed through fertile countryside of [Brittany?], passed the beautiful cathedral of [?], and arrived in St. Malo in time to arrange accommodation for the night. The city is really a picturesque city. It has a stonewall all the way around it which on the seaside faces the English Channel and on the inlet side a large salt water lagoon. The modern St. Malo, the lagoon is now kept at a constant sea level by the means of a series of locks so that ships can come and go without being toppled by the tidal influences. Well, it took all of next morning to make inquiries and find out how I was going to get to the birth place of Jacques Cartier and then I had to take several buses and finally arrived at this little village some miles to the north east of St. Malo. I inquired from a businessman there about his birthplace and he directed me to a little church across the road and he said that was where Cartier had said mass before he went on to his historic voyages. So, I went in there and after saying a quiet thank you in the atmosphere of the church, I started off on foot for some two miles along the country road on each side of which there were acres of artichokes that were all ready to be harvested. Until I came to this farm that was surrounded by a wall like the French people did in early days and on the side of the large gate, there was a tiny little plaque, not much bigger than that, and it said that it was the birthplace of Jacques Cartier and gave the date of his birth and death. I was disappointed myself that this was the only memento that I could find of this intrepid man and I felt and, I still do feel, that France and Canada should get together and erect a more suitable memorial.

In the archives in Ottawa, there are detailed accounts of Jacques Cartier's voyages but for the purposes of the summary of this, it gives us some appreciation of the hardships that these early explorers went through. The agonies that they suffered with scurvy in the dank holds of their ships as they weathered through their first Canadian winter until Spring came and Cartier's discovery of the Indian remedy of spruce bark brought them some relief.

I think we owe very much to Cartier for his determined strong leadership and his management

of suspicious, hostile Indians and his resolve to open up for future explorers the eastern gateway to Canada.

The fertile soil of Prince Edward Island soon attracted French colonists and later, after the Peace of Paris in 1763, British settlers came in. Among those that came was the Yates family and, at that time, trade and commerce was pretty well established and the father of Captain Yates, named Albert Francis, was born the son of a shipping broker. It is interesting to note that this was the year before Alexander Dunsmuir, son of Robert, was born in Nanaimo, the first white child in a little log cabin on Front Street and with whom he would later deal in the shipping circle of San Francisco.

Captain Yates #1: Young Albert Yates went to sea at age 12 as a deck boy on a merchant ship of sail to start his apprenticeship in the tough life of sea in those early days. He had spent three years at sea before the leaders in the political arena of the time had gathered in his capital city Charlottetown to frame the constitution to establish Canada as a Dominion on July 1st, 1867. He travelled the sailing routes of the world returning to his homeport on Prince Edward Island long enough to marry Sara Nelson, there again is another story, which goes back to Lord Nelson. In due time, he became master of his own vessel and husband and wife were able to travel together for some 15 years, during which time they had lived in Australia and New Zealand and two sons and a daughter had been born to them. It wasn't always easy at sea in those days in the windjammers. One of the boys took ill and died and Captain Yates had the sad office of saying the burial service and committing his son to a watery grave and then the daughter in a storm at sea was thrown out of her hammock and fractured her leg and, because she didn't have any medical attention, she was permanently crippled. Eventually, the shipping trade on the Pacific Western Coast drew Captain Yates to this part of the country, especially the San Francisco to Hawaii trade. Occasionally, he would substitute for other captains in bringing cargoes up to Nanaimo. So, because he was based more in San Francisco than the Eastern seaboard, Mrs. Yates, who had gone to Prince Edward Island to start the education of their children, travelled by boat and then by train across the continent to establish their home in Oakland, California. Then came the Klondike Gold Rush and Captain Yates was busy as the Master of the Bristol and carried miners and adventurers who were hungry for the wealth of the North and their supplies from San Francisco to Skagway. By this time in Nanaimo, Robert Dunsmuir and his son James had built up the production of Wellington coal and had improved the loading facilities at Departure Bay. There was a constant stream of ships coming and leaving our port to carry coal to San Francisco. The business interests of which were well managed by son Alexander Dunsmuir who was resident there. The Dunsmuir interests also had a fleet of ships to handle the local trade and participate also in trade to Seattle and San Francisco. When the peak of the Klondike Rush was over and the offer of employment with the Dunsmuir interests found Captain Yates and his family settling in Nanaimo. About 1900, he acquired the home we had spoken about on Roberts Street, which had been previously built, by Mayer and Wolfe at an earlier time. He spent many years at pilot to ships coming into Nanaimo, Departure Bay, and Ladysmith and before his retirement, he was Nanaimo's Harbour Master and Lloyd's of London Agent here. He died, age 78, in Nanaimo in 1930.

Captain Yates #2: This is our 98 year old. We have already recounted much of his life as he travelled here and there with his family. He was born in Auckland, New Zealand and was named Albert Fitzgerald on July 24th, 1883. He was a teenager by the time his father had become completely involved in the Pacific Northwest and the family settled in Oakland,

California. After his schooling had been completed he worked in an eye, ear, nose and throat doctor's office and then later in a dentist's office but this type of employment or [professional?] career had no appeal for young Albert. When the family settled in Nanaimo, he soon followed. He took passage on one of Dunsmuir's colliers to Costa Rica. It was in the year 1900. The year is of interest to note that Alexander Dunsmuir died a sad death at the early age of 53 on a visit to New York. As young Yates came into the Port of Nanaimo, there were two colliers loading coal at the docks and three sailing ships moored on the port hand as they came in the entrance to our Bay. This is just a reminder to indicate how brisk the trade was for the Dunsmuir Company. In spite of warnings of his father that he would find life at sea a hard mistress, our young man yearned to go to sea. One day the Wellington, a fine steamer, commissioned at Newcastle on Tyne in 1883, was loading coal in Ladysmith to go to San Francisco and young Arthur, with his family's blessing, was off to the Dunsmuir offices to sign on as a deckhand. This was in the year 1905. It was early in April 1906, that Seaman Yates, on the Wellington, steamed through the Straits of Juan de Fuca with coal for San Francisco. They had the advantage of the light and the foghorn on Cape Flattery. Seems so many wrecks are near the areas frequently shrouded in fog and fierce storms that lash the coast have driven many a ship onto the dangerous reefs at this entrance to the strait. The light had been installed in December 1857 which was no mean feat with hostile Indians to deal and the 100 foot bluff of the [Tatoosh?] Island, on which the light is placed. The steam fog signal, now replaced by air siren, had been installed March 3rd, 1871. For the crew of the Wellington, fog would have meant that two men would be required to man the hand winch that lowered the heavy lead weight to determine the depth of the sea and if they had been caught in the fierce storm, and required assistance, Marconi's wireless was not available for it was not until 1910 that this life saving communication was generally available to vessels at sea. Wellington stood well offshore along the Washington Coast avoiding the dangerous [\_\_\_\_?] reefs and the rocky headlands of Oregon. I've navigated along these waters many times, in fog and in fair weather and in storm, and, on occasion, without any communication or electronic aids, and I can sense and have felt the fears and dangers of those headlands. It was on the night of the 17th of April 1906, all was normal for the watch on duty aboard the Wellington. Seaman Yates was snug in his bunk on the [\_\_\_\_?] on the starboard side as they approached the high bluff entrance to San Francisco. The people in San Francisco themselves had gone to bed that night, some of them having listened to Enrico Caruso take the part of Juan Jose in Bizet's Carmen and had been thrilled by the brilliance of his lovely tenor voice. The Wellington was [steaming up a pilot?] to go into the San Francisco Bay at 5:12 in the morning the area of San Francisco was awakened by a terrific tremor of an earthquake that shattered the business district, opened up apertures in the City streets down to 21 feet in width, toppled buildings and ships in dry dock, causing a death toll of over 700, \$400,000,000 of damage to property and an estimated cost in economic loss in the billion range. The quake had registered 8.5 on the Richter scale and the tremor felt as far as Goose Bay, Oregon. The quake following along the San Andreas fault had cut across the City's water supply, thus robbing the fire department of water to fight the fires that raged for three days over five square miles of the stricken City. Seaman Yates on the Wellington was not disturbed as the pilot was picked up but was witness to the destruction of shipping facilities in the harbour and the disastrous effect of the earthquake and fire. The Wellington discharged her coal, took on cargo for Nanaimo, and in due time returned to Departure Bay glad to be home again for a spell. It was not long before able Seaman Yates was off to sea again.

Robert Dunsmuir Steamship Line this time had a fleet of steamers plying the ocean. Its Dunsmuir's sign on the smoke stack was a familiar sight in major ports of the world. With his

father's approval, young Arthur reported to the Dollar Steamship agent in Victoria and signed on as third mate on the [\_\_\_\_?]. He was well on his way to the long apprenticeship, study and sea time required for a master's certificate. He later transferred to the [Bessie\_\_\_\_?], the merchant steamer that received special mention in Robert Dollar's memoirs as having transported the first cargo of pig iron ever shipped to the United States from China. After serving for two years with the Dollar Line, employment was found in the Federal Fisheries Service. He signed on as Third Mate under Captain Laird on the patrol vessel Alcedo. Captain Laird had been the Captain on the Joanne, which many of you will remember playing as children on the deck and romping about just as children do today on the Queen of Cowichan. By the time Captain Laird retired Arthur Yates had qualified for his master ticket and was appointed to command the Alcedo by E. P. Taylor, then Inspector for the fisheries for the Vancouver Island District. This was a fisheries area, and Dr. Richter can correct me, that went from Fraser River to [Kincome Inlet?] and took in the Queen Charlotte Islands and the whole coast of Vancouver Island. Young Ray Collishaw was one of his mates on the Alcedo, who became our Canadian hero in World War II in the air force.

Captain Yates married Trixie Planta. This was Jeff Planta's eldest daughter and Josie Planta was one of my schoolmates. The Planta family has an interesting history which time will not permit me to review. Suffice it to say that their roots were in Australia. Jeff's father, Police Magistrate J.P. Planta had established himself here before the family came, had a long voyage from Australia and arrived in Esquimalt and after a short delay came up to Nanaimo in the Cariboo Fly. Jeff Planta was employed in the Haslam Coburn Lumber Mill which [?].

Back to Captain Yates. Steamer Alcedo proved too slow for the fisheries patrols increased demands and, after seven years under service of Captain Yates, was replaced by the faster [Fispa?] and, later by the diesel powered [Vinitas?]. This was Harold Pommer's [short?] Vancouver Island history. During this time, three children were born to the Yates/Planta union, Marion, Nelson and Annabelle. The later was named after her grandfather and Captain Yates first love in the sailing vessels, the Annabelle. With Captain Yates retirement from the [Vinitas?] in 1945, we now turn our attention to son Nelson, Captain Yates #3.

Captain Yates #3: At the turn of the century, most Nanaimo babies were born at home. Indeed, as late as 1936, I delivered quite a few Nanaimo babies out of hospital. The midwives were still active.

I remember Mrs. Reid who had a lying-in home on Albert Street near Selby, I think. Anyway, when Mrs. Arthur Yates came to term, Nelson was born in the old, old hospital, which I remember faced Kennedy Street that was well back on the property onto Machleary Street at Franklyn and Kennedy. The maternity was called the Mary Ward because it was named after Princess Mary, who became Queen Mary. Nelson attended grade school here and graduated from the John Shaw High School on Selby Street, then he went to the University of B.C., but this was not to his liking. He returned to Nanaimo and found employment at the Pacific Biological Station through Dr. R. E Forrester, who was then Director of the Station. As a Field Technician, he was off on the big [?] and glad to be at sea. This was his element.

Dr. Forrester recognized his ambitions and encouraged him to advance. Telling him that if he studied hard and worked, he could one day be employed on the Fisheries Patrol Boat. This was all young Nelson needed and soon he was off to Victoria to the Office of the CPR. B.C. Coastal Steamship Service. Captain Williams was then Marine Superintendent and Captain

McMurray Manager of the CPR at that time. Nelson was signed on as a deck hand on the Princess Elisabeth but was only on a month when he was moved up to be quartermaster on the Princess Victoria. Captain Williams encouraged him to study for his third mate's certificate. Three years service with the CPR brought him close to qualifying for a third mate. Men at sea have a colourful, if not salty pungent language. I'm afraid I would shock you if I used some of the descriptive words used by the men to describe their superior officers. Treatment of the sailors was not as bad as the flogging days of Captain [Bligh?] or the strict discipline of Captain [Nelious Simpson?]. master of the two masted schooner the Cadboro. She was a Hudson Bay Schooner that plied the waters in the mid 1800's. The Cadboro was described by some of the men who worked under him as a hell ship, with a slave like dog [hollystoning?] the decks and polishing brass in fair weather or foul. An interesting comment there too is that this Captain Simpson always wore white gloves and he changed his gloves, depending on what kind of a job he was going to be doing. Even so, during young Nelson's apprenticeship days, he was cautioned by his mates, as he assumed duty under various captains and senior officers, of some of the severe treatment he might expect. However Nelson was able to quickly establish rapport with his seniors for his grandfather and father were so well known that mere mention of his name or the fact even that he came from Nanaimo brought the response, 'You must be a Yates'. After severing his connection with the CPR, he returned to employment at the Pacific Biological Station. He became third mate and on the vessel [Vinitas?], formerly commanded by his father. A period of study at a nautical school in Vancouver and, having successfully passed examination, he qualified for his first mate's tickets. He was offered his master's certificate, for he was now qualified to take any cargo vessel to any port in the world.

He served on the [Vinitas?] the [Applin Post?] the Kitimat and, finally, the Laurier, all in the patrol service of the Federal Fisheries. Nelson was then assigned to the Canadian Fishing Company for several months for first hand training and experience in fishing techniques as used by this large company. He was then promoted to research studies at the Biological Station and to [?] the handling of a modern, more sophisticated gear used on the [\_\_\_?] on it's scientific research trips to various parts of this coast.

Now retired from his career on the sea, we bring to an end the sea saga of the Yates family. Nelson had married a Nanaimo girl, Mary or more familiarly known as Katie Higginbottom, in 1948. They had three daughters and a son, now all well established, two of them are married. The son, Arthur James, is a computer technician at IBM and unlikely to go to sea as a tradition of his forefathers.

As I left the residence of the Yates family on my last interview, the old Captain, 98, bright as a whistle, he said to me "Now be sure to go right home and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

You might be interested in some of these things. There is a picture of the Isobel, she was a tug used to tow the boats the ships up in and out to Cape Flattery. Here is a picture of the Lorne, who is one of another famous tugs on the coast.

Years ago it got wrecked, didn't it?

[Different Speakers?] Yes. Here is a very interesting book on the earthquake in San Francisco and there are a lot of pictures in here that were in the archives in the California Historical Society and this is a book on West Coast windjammers and shows many of the

same vessels that came into Nanaimo and many of them eventually burned or wrecked on one [?] or another.

I know my husband won't announce it. You see how shy and brow beaten he is. He is a product of Captain Yates's training; he received his quartermaster's ticket under Captain Yates.

Thank you very much Dr. Williams.

I remember an Annabelle Yates in my high school years; I remember the name quite well.

That is their daughter.

Very entertaining. I thought when you started and you started off when I was a lad I served a term, we were about to go into one of Gilbert and Sullivan's and I had visions of you becoming lord of the queen's navy before you finished for the evening. I am glad you stuck to Captain Yates.

May I ask a serious question? Do you know the significance of the name Alcedo?

I didn't get that.

It is the word for kingfisher. The Latin name for the kingfisher.

I see.

Could I address a little historical item here, which Mrs. [?] knew about? Mrs. [?] husband's nephew Bert Tupper, who invented ship to shore radio telephone, was born on the day of the San Francisco earthquake, which was interesting in that you were commenting that they had no method of communicating with the shore. That was the day that the fellow who introduced it, was born.

Now I see that our coffee and tea are nearly ready over there and I will remind you that we have a plate over there to put some money in so that Mrs. Williams may return us some more money later on. There are a couple of other things I would just like to say before we go. I am delighted to see so many visitors here tonight and I hope that this is just the first of your many comings down here to our meetings and I hope eventually most of you will join our Society because we have great fun down here and the third thing is to remind those of you again that you had to pay your dues either this month or next month but certainly before the annual meeting as we are always very busy that night and, the earlier Mrs. Kneen gets them in, the sooner we can get our books in order. Thank you very much

END OF TAPE