

## **An Interview with P.J. Piper**

Transcribed by Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University Library  
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[tape begins abruptly, and is of poor quality]

William Barraclough

We are recording the voice of Mr. Philip J. Piper at his home, 15 Bastion Street, Nanaimo, as living memory. From Nanaimo Historical Society, of which Mr. Piper is a member. This 20th day of August, 1968. This is William Barraclough speaking. Introducing Mr. Piper.

Mr. Piper, where and when were you born?

P.J. Piper

I was born in Nanaimo, August the 22nd, 1891, in the 300 block, Nicol Street.

WB

Now, about your parents coming to Nanaimo?

PJP

My father came up in 1888 with his father and his brothers. And my mother, with my two brothers, Cyril and Joe, they arrived a year later.

WB

And life as a boy in Nanaimo, what games did you play?

PJP

Well, [unintelligible] and mostly around the mine games such as soccer, knobbies, duck on a rock, and baseball, and a bit of, everything was going on...

WB

Do you remember bonfire night on the 5th of November?

PJP

Very well. Very well I remember that. That was quite an event in our young lives. We for about six weeks prior to the bonfire night, we'd be gathering [ribs?] out of the countryside there, to build this fire. And we always had to have a sentinel on because the opposing gangs, from the different parts of the town would come and burn it down, or something like that. We always had to have a sentinel on, all night long, to protect it.

WB

I understand you had to clear the ground at Machleary Street?

PJP

Yes, that was our playground. In those days, there's, there was you might say gangs, or associations, or whatever, had [drawn lines?]. But there was the Mosquitoes on the town side, and then there was the Town Rats on the downtown on the Green, and then there was the Tar Flats, and then was another [regards?] the Five Acres, we called them the Stump Pullers, and then, of course, we had our own name and our grounds, and we were known as the Night Hawks. And that was on the corner of Machleary and Franklyn Street, just opposite the Nanaimo General Hospital.

WB

You mention the Tar Flats. That name always intrigues me, why did it come to be called that?

PJP

Well, as far as I could gather on that information, was that in the earlier days, the coal company in preparing their piles and heavy timbers for dock work, they used to build trenches and dump the tar in, and treat them in the tar, and the barrels were on that square that's known as Deverill Square now, they started there, and that's how it got its name, Tar Flats, as far as I can recollect.

WB

Mr. Piper, where did you attend school?

PJP

I attended public schools in Nanaimo, known now as the Central School. And I will recall my first teacher was Miss Ruth George, and incidentally, she was very, very particular on cleanliness. In fact, pretty near every morning, she'd have a little tour of inspections of all the pupils.

Miss George is now residing in Victoria, and from what I can gather, her age is about 88.

WB

Yes, we have a friend, Mr. Pick, who called on Miss George the other day. And she's quite well. And she was asking for [?] and Mr. [Philip?]. And now where did you first work?

PJP

My first real job that I had was bellhopping at the Wilson Hotel for Mr. James R. McKinnell, and then after that I went to J.H. Bailey the plumber. And I didn't stay very long 'til I took up employment, was employed by a Mr. David J. Jenkins, undertaker on Bastion Street.

WB

And that was 1909, you say.

PJP

1909, and November the 11th, no, the 1st.

WB

And what year did you retire?

PJP

Retired in 1947.

WB

1947. Mr. Piper, do you remember the long bridge on Commercial Street?

PJP

No, that was before my time, I don't recall that. But I do recollect the dirt roads and the wooden sidewalks, and that all the hotels in those days used to have like a canopy or a veranda over their entrance to their buildings.

WB

Yes. And about the ravine water way? You mentioned to me once that you paddled a raft in it.

PJP

Oh boy, I remember that. Many, many time we youngsters would build ourselves rafts and tow a friend 'round Commercial Inlet there, and we'd paddle all around through a culvert that came out round by the BC Hydro office is now, right up to and, I'd paddled on several occasions right up to the Newcastle Hotel. Which is known now as Terminal Avenue.

5:38

WB

And then in civic affairs, would you, tell us something about that?

PJP

Well, I can remember a time when I was persuaded to allow my name to go up for the Parks Board. And I served five terms as chairman of the Parks Board. And then after that I went into more civic, and I was elected to the council. I served five years, five terms, on the city council.

WB

As city alderman, eh?

PJP

Yes.

WB

Now looking out from your observation porch here, a few minutes ago, towards Piper Park, there is a lot of very historic machinery on there. Now, I wished you would give us a little information about them.

PJP

I took it up with the foreman at that time, and I suggested that the leisure time, that if you put the men in there to clean this little corner up. And as we got into it, in a matter of three or four days, we could see a potentialities there that would make a beautiful little site. And which we continued to do, and it proved to be a very valuable asset to the City of Nanaimo.

Now, how it became its name of Piper Park, was by the workmen, at one of their lunch hours, they was sitting down, and one of the men asked how they were to make out their time cards. And one of the men spoke up and said, "Why don't we make it Piper Park?" And that's how the council adopted in those days, as Piper Park.

WB

Just as simple as that.

PJP

Just as simple.

WB

Now about the engine?

PJP

Now the engine, that's a very, very long story on that. I was five years endeavouring to get that locomotive to place in the park. And after five years of endeavouring and talking with Harry Plumber, the general superintendent of the Coal Company, I couldn't get anywhere very well. So Bob Swanson, the provincial boiler inspector, he contacted me one day and he drew my attention to the fact that he saw in the paper where I was endeavouring to get this locomotive.

And he asked me, he said, "Now, don't you bother about this," he says, "I'll attend to it." He says, "I'll get that for you." Which he did.

WB

Mr. Piper, about that locomotive?

PJP

Unique feature of that locomotive, in my opinion, is the father was the first driver, and his name was Benjamin Rozzano and his son, Joe Rozzano, was the last driver. And Mr.

Rozzano Senior, he drove that locomotive from north Wellington, down to the coal bunkers at Departure Bay. And the son, Joe, he drove it to South Wellington, and also drove it out to where its present site is today.

WB

Now about all the other items there?

PJP

Now, we have in there too, we have the [spar] wheels that were brought around The Horn for the first coal cars, for to haul coal from the mine head to the bunkers and the docks in Nanaimo harbour. And then on the other hand, we have the first pump. It was donated by Samuel M. Robins to the Nanaimo Fire Brigade. And that didn't prove satisfactory because they couldn't keep the pressure up, and they had to abandon that and that, they got a larger pump with 10 men, 20 men, 10 men on each side, pumped in order to keep up the pressure for the hoses.

9:13

WB

And about those iron pilings?

PJP

Now the pilings, they were brought around The Horn too. Now, they were around about maybe 30 or 40 feet long. And you screwed them into the mud, just like an auger. And then your timbers were set on top of that.

WB

Looking out of the window here, again, I see the upper part of our beautiful, new Centennial Museum. And, Mr. Piper, you were a charter member of that too.

PJP

Yes. And Mr. Barraclough, you are. And also Mr. Burdock, who is sitting across the table from he. He was a charter member, and also a very indulgent worker on there, both of you.

WB

Yes, we're all very proud of the new museum.

The location of this building, where you reside, on the corner of Bastion and Front Street is a very historic site.

PJP

Yes, a few yards south of us here, in Commercial Inlet, there's the first discovery of coal. And later on, the Hudson's Bay Company erected their compound. Now, across the street

from here is the famous Bastion, built in 1853 by the Hudson's Bay Company for the protection of their inhabitants here and their employees. And then just beyond that, towards the shorelines, is the cairn erected there in memory of the *Royal*, of the *Princess Royal* passengers who had come to work the coal mines for the Hudson's Bay Company.

Then up the street, there, just now where the Shoreline Hotel is erected now, is where the Hudson's Bay erected four or five cabins or cottages for their employees.

WB

You have one of the finest collections of historic pictures in Nanaimo. Just how did you acquire these?

PJP

Well, it was always [an interest] of mine, the history of Nanaimo, and historical events, and I always made a point to pick up any that I could in that respect, and that's how I accumulated so many of the photographs that I have in my possession. And they've proved to be very valuable down through the years as they're coming into us for now.

WB

Indeed they have. And now about Protection Island torch, Mr. Piper?

PJP

Now, that strange as it may seem, the Gyro Club, which I was a member of at that time, we were going to have, they were talking about building a big bonfire on Deverill Square to celebrate the V.J. Day, I think it was. And I came up with a [brain wave?] and I rose to the occasion, and even Mr. Burdock might remember it, because I think he was a member at that time. And I brought up the idea, that we'd [appoint] the Coal Company for permission to burn the pit head down on Protection Island. And at that time, you know, when you come up with an idea, you was appointed chairman right away. So, I accepted the challenge, and I approached the Coal Company, and with due course, we got permission to do it.

And it was quite an event. The whole shoreline of the city of Nanaimo was lined up with people, it was quite a sight. And incidentally at that time, I did have, come up with a brain wave that I wanted the eldest native son of Nanaimo, in the person of Mr. Samuel Thompson, that's Mrs. Barraclough's father, and I wanted him to set the torch to a fire. And it was a spectacular sight.

[tape cuts out and restarts]

For the records, I'd like to state here that Mr. Samuel Thompson, the man that set the torch, he was born in Nanaimo, on the corner of Commercial and Church Street, in the log cabin cottage, situated just where Grassick's jewellery store is today.

WB

Right across the street here is a very ancient stone building. How about that?

PJP

Well, that building was built for Mr. John Hirst, a pioneer merchant of Nanaimo, a very prominent family in around Nanaimo in the earlier days. And down through the years that was used as his warehouse and he also had what was known as Hirst's Wharf.

[tape cuts out and restarts]

The store building in question was built in 1875 and was used for a great many years as a warehouse, as already stated, and then later on, Johnny Mahrer, wholesale liquor house, occupied it; then later on, Frank Stannard Feed and Grain, he occupied it. And for some time it was converted into operating as a coal storage and lockers for domestic foods, and things like that. And now, at the present time it's been converted into offices for the Nanaimo Harbour Commission.

14:19

WB

Now, Mr. Piper, tell us about your married life.

PJP

Well, I married into a pioneer family. The eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Reuben Ferguson, and my wife's name is Edith E. Ferguson at that time. And Mr. Ferguson's, her, Edith's grandfather, arrived and took up farming in 1863 in the Cedar district. We were blessed with a [beautiful?] family: son Earl F. in Vancouver, and a daughter, Beryl D. in Portland, Oregon. Last, but not least, grandson Brock, also of Vancouver.

WB

Here we are introducing Mrs. Piper. Mrs. Piper, could you inform us about this highly polished brass Russian samovar?

EP

Yes, that belonged to my grandmother. And she brought it out from England, and it was given to her by her grandmother when she left for here. And we have, we really know that it is about 200 years old. And ...

WB

And where is Commander Ferguson buried?

EP

Oh, he is buried in this old cemetery at the corner of Comox Road and Wallace Street.

WB

Mr. Piper, you have a story that I think is worth recording concerning the ship *Albatross*. Would you like to speak on it?

PJP

To the best of my recollections, in the year 1904, a group of local businessmen, consisting of Angus R. Johnson, Edward Quennell, George E. Norris, John M. Rudd, Alfred Mace, and Charles Wardill, purchased a former torpedo boat from the U.S. Navy for the purpose of transporting fish to a Seattle market. She is registered by the name of *Albatross*. She had a very sleek lines. I do not recall, recollect her speed, but from all reports, she was very fast and her fuel consists of cord wood.

The parties who purchased the *Albatross* had to sign on as a crew to comply with the marine law, as there was no freeloading on her maiden trip to Nanaimo. The following were listed: as captain: Alfred Mace; engineer: Charles Wardill; quartermaster: Jerry P. McGill; fireman: George Banasky; purser: John M. Rudd; deckhand: George E. Norris.

An interesting event about the *Albatross* on her maiden voyage to Nanaimo, they stopped at Mudge Island, just south of Dodd Narrows, docking at John Gamble's wharf, for the purpose of taking on cord wood for fuel. After a short visit there, they proceeded towards Nanaimo with the intention of making a grand entry to her home port, her new home port.

They were docking on the west side of A.R. Johnson's Wharf, right behind the post office, when something went wrong between the pilot house and the engine room, causing the ship to run ashore. The captain maintained his bell called for full steam astern, while the engineer insisted his bell called for full steam ahead. As I recollect, it was not a serious mishap, but within a few hours' time, the crew had her afloat by using pinch bars and crow bars.

I was a witness to the *Albatross* grounding at that time, all the above persons concerning have crossed the great divide. I had the pleasure of knowing them all personally.

18:29

WB

Now, about what you have told me about all the herrings being in Nanaimo harbour?

PJP

In the days in question, the *Joan*, a passenger ship, plying between Nanaimo and Vancouver. Shoals of herring were churned up to the surface by her propellers and her prow. In those days, at certain times, the harbour was full of herring. The *Joan* usually left Nanaimo at 7 a.m., returning at 4:20 p.m. It was a common sight to see the scows loaded with herring along the side of Johnson's Wharf.

On one occasion, the employees neglected to cover the scow laden with herring, and the result was the seagulls feasting, so many from the one side, it caused the scow to capsize, dumping the fish back in to the sea, as a total loss.

WB

What about this transportation of fresh fish from Nanaimo to Seattle, was it successful? Or, and what happened to the *Albatross*?

PJP

Well, apparently, that scheme wasn't successful, and from what I could gather, they abandoned it. And what happened to the *Albatross*, I have no information whatsoever.

WB

You have shown me a picture of two scows in the harbour, just loaded with herring. And there were hundreds of seagulls around them.

PJP

Yeah, they were in those days, there, A.R. Johnson was in a [big way] in salteries. And in fact, down on his dock, known as A.R. Johnson's Wharf, he had a saltery on the west side of the dock, where all the herring used to be shipped into. And then there's quite a big saltery on, I believe it was run by Japanese, down in Newcastle Channel. Just opposite of Brechin Point there.

WB

Mr. Piper, now will you close this interview?

PJP

Yeah, it's a pleasure for me, Mr. Barraclough, to thank you for the privilege of making this recording, and taping it for yourself and maybe the Historical Society. It was a pleasure of mine, and also I wish to convey my thanks on behalf of Mrs. Piper also.

20:44

WB

On visits to your home Mr. Piper, I have always admired this beautiful, chiming clock. And I think it is just about ready to strike the hour five.

[clock chiming]

[tape stops and restarts]

WB

November 13th, 1968. This short commentary refers to a talk presented by Alderman Philip J. Piper over CHUB Radio, May the 12th, 1953. And recorded by Mr. Chuck Rudd, manager of the radio station.

Mr. Piper was appealing to the citizens of Nanaimo to secure the Beban Estate at Northfield for recreation purposes. Results of a referendum submitted to the rate payers of Nanaimo on May 14th to purchase the property, comprising 163 acres for \$50,000, was approved by a vote of 4 to 1 in favour. According to a survey in February 1954, the city engineer states: "The property comprised 172.5 acres". This acquisition by the City of Nanaimo of the property now known as Exhibition Park, expressed a vote of confidence to Alderman Piper.

The next voice you'll hear will be that of Alderman Phil J. Piper as recorded over CHUB May the 12th, 1953.

23:12

PJP

I welcome this opportunity to speak to you this evening in regard to the purchase of the Beban property. For, as you know, I'm completely sold on this idea. And so, I'm extremely grateful to Mayor Muir, Mr. Chuck Rudd, and Radio Station CHUB, for this privilege, and I can only hope that I prove equal to this important occasion.

It is said that there is a tide in the affairs of men, which if taken at the flood, leads to fortune. In other words, there is a time when we must be wise enough to recognize opportunity when we see it. I feel that we are in the position right now, in regards to the proposal to buy the Beban property.

If we look back, we can recall the time that the whole future of our city seemed to be tied in with the coal mines. And some went as far as to predict that the closing of the mines would leave us with a ghost city on our hands. This prediction has been proven to be absolutely wrong, and today we are assured of a greater future than even the most optimistic ever thought possible.

With this background, it is excusable that in the past, sufficient provision was not made for the recreation needs of a community, which as we have seen, has continued to expand by leaps and bounds. And which has, in every prospect, to continue to do so.

In circumstances like this, we are particularly fortunate that such a golden opportunity, to redeem, in almost one swoop, the mistake of the past, of not providing for the recreational needs of our community. However, one of the finest features of this proposal is that it is not only providing for our immediate needs, but it will, if properly developed, meet the needs of the community for years to come.

I would even go so far as to say that this is the greatest feature of the proposal. It may take vision, but I believe that if we could gaze into the future, say 50 or 60 years hence, we would be stunned at what our foresight now has done.

For the future we can ready, and instead of the [reclamations] of the lack of good planning of their forefathers, we would be blessed for leaving to them such a wonderful heritage.

You have been told how much land is included in the deal, and that in addition, it includes the beautiful home and grounds of Mrs. Beban. Together, with numerous outhouses, cabins, etc. And a fine water supply system. However, to appreciate the possibilities of this estate, it must be seen, and almost without exception, all who have seen it have been tremendously impressed.

I've had the pleasure of showing numbers of people around the place. And last week, we organized a sight-seeing party to go over the grounds, and unless I'm greatly mistaken, every one of these people will be advocates for the [purchasing] of this property.

26:18

It has been suggested that the electors should be given the choice of several sites when the matter is voted upon. This is a fine idea. We have had the sites to choose from, which we haven't. This is not only problem we have been trying to overcome in the matter in finding sites, which had been in, is one of our worst headaches right now. We need a site for combined police and fire station. We need a site for city yard, until now we have done a lot of head scratching to figure out where to get a site for the recreation centre. And looking for such a site, we envisioned the site of sufficient [magnitude] to serve the exhibition grounds, playing fields, and carnival events, sporting fields, and fields of sports. In other words the site which would eventually be to Nanaimo what Hastings Park is to Vancouver.

Now, I ask you: where can you find such a site within reasonable distance of the city? Remember also to keep in mind the need of ample parking as part of the general scheme, which in itself would absorb several acres of ground. I say quite frankly that I know of none, other than the one we have now within our grasp.

We have investigated several sites which we thought might be suitable in a pinch, and the council even went as far as to try to obtain the price on one site. This was the 80 acre tract of north end of the Wakesiah army camp. And then several months ago several of us came to the conclusion that it did not lend itself to the purpose we had in mind.

In the meantime, the school board had approached us with a proposition for us to take over part of the high school site and develop it into recreational field. But the area involved was far too small for the purpose in which we had in mind.

This is one time where I can truthfully say that the more we go to it, the more I'm convinced that it presents a great opportunity which we cannot afford to pass up. Some may question its location. Again this is where we must rely on a little vision. And to do so, it should be only necessary for me to draw a few things to your attention. First, I think you'll agree with me that the city is rapidly developing towards Departure Bay. Any of you who are familiar with Vancouver will remember when Hastings Park was in the sticks. Miles out of town and still is miles away for many Vancouver residents. But Hastings Park is now in the centre of a built up area.

It is in my conviction that the Beban property will occupy a much more central position in Nanaimo in the years to come than Hastings Park will, in regard to, in relation to Vancouver. It will have good access from all directions and accommodation of parking of thousands of cars will be no problem. I foresee the day when Nanaimo will be the exhibition centre of the Island. As it is rapidly becoming the distribution centre of the Island now, to provide our [plans?] a [late?] copy now.

With 163 acres of the Beban Estate, there is room for almost unlimited expansion. This gives us an area almost twice as large as the whole of the Bowen Park, which stretches, as you know, from the railroad track on Comox Road to the Quarterway. Think of it, all this land, and a big [room house?] thrown in for \$50,000. And all the electors have to do, to meet the [heritage?] [laws?] is to say yes.

I was born and raised here and never in my, in all my [investments?] have I seen any which seemed to fit so perfectly with the scheme of things. And speaking for myself, I still am trying to pinch myself occasionally, and I can scarcely believe in our extreme good fortune to have such a chance arrive just at the time we were looking for the break in the [kind?]

Now, I would like to take you back to the beautiful home again. It has been suggested that it be made into home of our aged citizens. And with this suggestion, I'm fully accord. For there's one thing to which we have to look forward, to provide suitable accommodation, which is long overdue. In my opinion, the present arrangements are cruel. When our elder citizens become incapable of taking care of themselves, they are placed in various homes in Cobble Hill, Victoria, or Vancouver, away from their friends, into a strange environment. And we all know, as the years go by, it is not easy for us to make new friends.

And so I say it is essential that we have a home for these people in close proximity up to Nanaimo, near to their friends and the people with whom they associate with down through the years. [coughs] Excuse me.

I merely mention this point just to point out that the possibilities are there, but I would state, that this is an expression of my own opinion and endorsed by many of our citizens and does not in any way involve the policy of your council and this important and vital matter.

Some of you no doubt will be wondering what plans are afoot for developing the property if we get it. This is one question no one can answer, as the development of this property will extend over years, and in my opinion will have to be planned accordingly. At the present time, we are providing groundwork for such development and [packing?] must be added later. [Our] need have no fears in this regard, if the same wisdom is shown in this development as I hope will be shown, we'll show by going all out to see, that the vote on Thursday next week is favourable to the purchase this property.

So, if you agree with me that this deal means as much to the city as I feel it does, then I appeal to you to do everything in your power to make this thing an outstanding success. While I cannot think of any consideration we should block this scheme, there is one thing about it I wish [folks?] knew more than fable, and that is the fact that the money is to [bring] the property is really on hand and does not have to be raised in by taxes or by another method. As a matter of fact, it is set aside for this purpose, and this, and if we fail to take advantage of this golden opportunity, now it is doubtful that we ever have another chance. Incidentally, I should probably also mention at this time in the event of the city taking over this property, there will be no further taxes to pay upon it. As all city property is exempt from provincial taxes.

Our chance is then to take advantage of this property is now and rests with you and me. In my opinion, we will never receive so much for so little. I would appreciate if you would get out and vote and help your council to help yourselves.

[Good night?] [Good luck?]

[recording ends]

33:05