An Interview with W.R. Manson
William R. Manson
Recorded interview with William Barraclough on March 15, 1966

Reminiscing on Boyhood Days
Dayrell Bate
Address to the Nanaimo Historical Society on November 8, 1966

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William Barraclough
This recording, made the 15th day of March 1966, between William Barraclough, as interviewer, and William Manson of Nanaimo, as living memory for the Nanaimo Historical Society. Introducing Mr. William Manson.

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, your full name, please?

William Manson
William R. Manson, I was born in Nanaimo in 1885.

William Barraclough
And what led to the decision of several members of the Manson family to leave the Shetland Islands in Scotland to settle in British Columbia?

William Manson
Our folk came from the Shetland Islands, Scotland. While Shetlanders were a hard-working, independent people, yet living conditions in about 1870 were poor in Shetland: very little employment and little opportunity to improve. News came of great development in Western Canada. The first of the Manson family to seek his fortune here was Michael. He settled in Nanaimo in about 1875, and did well. In a letter to his brother, Laurence, later to be our father, he told how it was no problem to get work. His work was driving a locomotive, he said, hauling coal from the Chase River mine to the loading wharf at Nanaimo. He was being pressed to work double shifts and more helpers were needed. He said that living conditions here were so much better than in Shetland.

In Nanaimo, he said, he could have meat in his meals as often as twice a day; whereas once a week was a luxury in Shetland. He said that he owned a lot on Haliburton Street, with a home built on it, which he could share. And there was a well with a bountiful supply of good water. So, Michael said, "Come, there is nothing in Shetland for you to compare with this."

Our father decided to come, and he arrived in Nanaimo in 1877. Since the CPR was not built at that time, it was necessary, after arriving in New York, to travel by train to San Francisco; and from there by boat, to Victoria, which was a Hudson's Bay trading
post. The only way to travel from Victoria to Nanaimo was by boat, which he did upon his first opportunity.

My dad’s first job was with a coal company, where he had oversight of the work at the pithead. Chinese were employed there, handling the moving of coal cars. Michael Manson sold the store, which he had built on the corner of Haliburton Street and Farquhar Street, to our father.

William Barraclough
Were your father and mother married before leaving the Shetland Islands?

William Manson
No, our mother, Catherine Duncan, arrived in Victoria, from Shetland, in 1880; where our father met her, and they were married there. Our mother’s diary tells of her voyage across the Atlantic; her train journey from New York to San Francisco; how she saw Native Indians, and Chinese for the first time in her life. She wrote about their unusual appearance and manners. The vastness of the new country being crossed was also impressive. Six children were born during the Mansons’ residence at Haliburton Street. Three of these now remain here: Willy (Will), Ernie, and Doug.

William Barraclough
After Michael Manson sold the property comprising the store and house on Haliburton Street to your father, what happened to Michael?

William Manson
Michael bought a business on Commercial Street, which he operated, but later disposed of it to follow a seafaring career. Having qualified to receive captain's papers, he bought a tug for towing barges of freight. He travelled much up and down the coast, finally settling on Cortes Island. Being well-known in the northern area, he was asked to run as a candidate for the provincial government. He was elected to the B.C. legislature, and continued in office, a member of the Conservative party, until the time of his death. He died suddenly, at Powell River, while attending to government duties.

05:16

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, you mentioned that other members of the Manson family came to Nanaimo, British Columbia, and became very active in political circles.

William Manson
Yes, there was also another brother, John Manson, who followed Laurence, in settling on Vancouver Island. Later he became a rancher on a Cortes Island, where he was highly respected. And there spent his last days.

The youngest brother, William J. Manson, was the last of that family to come west. He worked first at the Haliburton Street Manson’s store. Then, moving from there to the
Mainland, he continued in business life. Later, he was elected to represent Dewdney District, in the provincial legislature, as a member of the McBride Conservative party. In the B.C. parliament at that time, the Conservative party made an almost clean sweep of the political situation. All elected were Conservatives except two Socialists.

At that time, it was remarked that there were more, a total of three, Mansons in the house, than there were members in the Opposition. In addition to the two brothers elected, as mentioned, there was also a cousin: William Manson, a former mayor of the city of Nanaimo, and later mayor of Prince Rupert. And from that district, he was elected to the B.C. legislature.

William Barraclough
Speaking of your father’s cousin, William Manson, reading the records here of Nanaimo, I see where he was elected alderman first in 1898, then 1899, and 1900 while Mark Bate was mayor. And then he became mayor of Nanaimo in 1901, ’02, ’03, and 1904.

William Manson
I have no doubt that that record is correct.

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, can you describe some of your opinions of the early days of Nanaimo, especially your boyhood days.

William Manson
My earliest recollections of life in Nanaimo are of everything being done in a primitive way. There was a business section on Commercial Street and Victoria Crescent; there were dusty or muddy roads; in some parts there were wooden sidewalks. The tide went in and out of a ravine that extended at the back of the stores on Commercial Street, almost to where Nelsons Laundry now stands. A long, wooden bridge crossed the ravine, at the point where it is now the Commercial-Terminal intersection.

We depended on wells for water, coal oil for lighting, wood and coal for fuel. This made plenty of chores for every family and children were mostly kept out of mischief by having to attend to their allotted duties. However, we had our sports and entertainments that were really enjoyed.

Two policemen managed the police duties and crime was not a serious problem. Firemen ran on foot to fires, pulling a hose-reel cart. Nanaimo was noted for winning in inter-city races, for running and attaching hose to the hydrants. That is after a waterworks system was established.

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, what are your recollections of the early areas of Nanaimo and the business development?
William Manson
While the growth of our city was not sensational at first, yet it was steady. Many people had gardens, well stocked with vegetables and beautiful flowers. The coal company encouraged the miners to settle on five acre lots in the district now called Harewood. The development was noticeable in that area.

Like in most coal mining towns, business was good in Nanaimo while the coal market was steady. There would be the occasional depression or strikes that would set everything back. Amongst the stores there was friendly competition. Methods of business kept changing and improving. Mansons retired from business about ten years ago, when the remnant on the stock on hand was donated to the general store of the remade gold mine town at Barkerville. This is part of a project prepared by the B.C. government as a tourist attraction.

In all the progress we have seen in Nanaimo, especially of late, the prediction that "grass would grow in the streets of Nanaimo" after the closing of the coal mines has worked out the opposite way, and prospects for the future were never brighter.

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, when the Department of Recreation and Conservation from Victoria were establishing Barkerville as a tourist attraction, they came to Nanaimo, and I understand they loaded truckloads of fixtures and items of stock from your old store on Haliburt on Street. Now, will you kindly tell us some of the main items that they took?

William Manson
Yes, they were interested in the long counter that had served in this store from the 1870s; they took that. They took the old shelving from the walls. They took the old cash till that we used under the counter. They took the gas lamps that were once used. And fixtures that they could set up in the Barkerville store.

William Barraclough
Now, I understand some of the clothing that they took would be period clothing of ladies?

William Manson
Yes, some of it had accumulated, and when the committee from Victoria were looking over the old stock, they often would shriek with delight when they found some very old-fashioned item of clothing, or old shoes, ladies shoes, that were high, pointed toes, and buttoned. And these were of special interest and are now displayed at Barkerville.

William Barraclough
Amongst the items, did they have one of these old-fashioned cheese cutters?

William Manson
No, our method of business went back beyond the introducing of the cheese cutters, we used the old-fashioned knife. [laughing]
William Barraclough
During your experiences with the store, you must have had a lot of trade with the Indian people and possibly Chinese people too. Could you give us a little of the life of these people?

William Manson
Yes, my early impression of the Chinese was in their very different way of life, and their difficulty with our language. They lived in a crowded town of their own. While their customs and way of life were strange to us, yet they were fairly easy to understand and get along with. The Indians had their problems. The only way to speak to the older Indians was through using the Chinook Jargon, which was commonly used. The Indians liked to dress in bright coloured clothing, the women mostly wore large shawls. Many men did not wear shoes at any season of the year. They lived mostly by fishing, and sold fish at cheap prices from door-to-door.

14:06

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, I know the Manson family have been closely associated with the churches of Nanaimo, have you got a little history of some of that?

William Manson
To the credit of our forefathers, it must be said that they early built a church, school, and a hospital. These contributed definitely to the better development of a good standard of life. The early schools would now be considered very old-fashioned. There were mixed classes and rooms very often poorly heated, ventilated, and lighted. When I first attended the high school here, there was one teacher who taught all the subjects including: mathematics, bookkeeping, agriculture, and several languages. Yet, out of all of this, some students became outstanding doctors, lawyers, teachers, and good citizens.

William Barraclough
This outstanding high school teacher, Mr. Manson, what was his name?

William Manson
Mr. Walter Hunter.

William Barraclough
And he, how many students would there be in the class?

William Manson
Oh, probably 40.

William Barraclough
40 students in high school.
I would like at this point to introduce my wife, who has just now been reminiscing with Mr. Manson of a Sunday school picnic. Would you ask Mr. Manson about that?

Ethel Barraclough
Mr. Manson, can you remember the time that you took, oh maybe about 10, for a picnic in your wagon up Nanaimo River? And we crossed before we got to the bridge, we went to the right, but whose farm - I would never remember.

William Manson
Yes, I remember that picnic; it was on a Good Friday. And we had the team of horses, the usual way of travelling at that time, and I was familiar with this picnic ground because it was near a fishing hole that we often went to. And we had a very nice time. Everett Snider came along with me to assist. And as usual, when we went on these picnics, we had a very nice time.

William Barraclough
Mr. Manson, will you now please close this interview?

William Manson
Yes, we started, Mr. Barraclough, to talk of circumstances that led to the Manson family coming to Nanaimo. In conclusion, I would like to say that, in my opinion, Nanaimo cannot be beaten for its climate, scenery, and all that contributes to comfort and happiness, as an ideal place in which to live.

17:17

[tape stops and restarts]

William Barraclough
This tape recorded address by Mr. Dayrell Bate, was presented before Nanaimo Historical Society in the Credit Union Building, November 8th, 1966. Reminiscing on his boyhood days at Cumberland, B.C., and visiting his grandparents at Nanaimo: Mr. and Mrs. Mark Bate, and Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Dixon.

Dayrell Bate
I consider it a privilege to be able to tell you a little bit about early Vancouver Island as I experienced it as a youth, and as a young man. The time that I knew Grandpa Bate, which I know that you're all interested in hearing about, Grandpa had already served Nanaimo for approximately 50 years. So, when, my walks with Grandpa Bate, and so forth, about the streets of Nanaimo, I was just a lad. So I will try to recall as much as I can of what he discussed with me, and his hopes and what he thought of the future of this city when which we reside at this time.

For a moment, I'm going to digress a little bit away from Nanaimo. I was born in Cumberland, B.C. My father, Thomas Bate, he was born in Nanaimo, March 31st, 1863 - a little over a hundred years ago. And he died in Vancouver, in Kerrisdale exactly, in
January 1937. Dad, from what the tales that I remember him telling me, I think in the early days of Wellington, he was a locomotive engineer. Because he used to fascinate me with his stories of in the locomotive loaded with cars: backing down; and making a run for the top of the grade, wherever it was; it wouldn't make it; and he'd have to back down again; get up more speed; and up he'd go.

That's before I was born. My sisters, Vivien, Muriel, and May, and Evelyn, I believe were born in Wellington. I was born in Cumberland in 1899. The...Dad...remember the tale, something about Wellington, where the homes were starting to sink into the ground, possibly caused through the mines caving in. So, about that time he moved to Cumberland and opened a hardware store.

My early recollections at that time, were the horse and buggy days, of course, where Dad has his sulky, his phaeton, and a couple of horses. I must have been very young on this particular occasion, because my mother passed away when I was seven years old. But I recall them riding with their buggies down to Royston, or in that area somewhere, looking for a place to set up a summer home, one particular July and August, which we, like gypsies, every summer spent on the beach in that area.

But on this particular occasion, I must have been very, very small, because I recall when they were looking, it must have been just after a rainstorm, and it seemed we went in under a bunch of maple trees, I assume; it must have been just after a rain. The sunshine was streaking through like you see the lights in the theatre, or spotlights, and the robins were singing their head off. And that's a recollection, probably I was four, five, or six at that time, that I have never forgotten.

I also remember up around Royston, when the Rainbow, the Niobe, and the Algerine, used to moor over at the Comox spit, and we boys would get the rowboat over to see the sailors. And we used to like to explore on the old Comox spit, because there were a lot of relics that the sailors had left, such as maybe old shells. And also they used to like to bury their pets. They had little graves planted here and there on the old Comox spit.

We had some very happy times at Royston in the camping days. There was the Matthews, the Lidstones, the Tarbells. They were glorious days that we spent in that area. But, during certain times of the year, one of the highlights that we had was to come down and see the grandparents in Nanaimo.

It was quite an experience for a lad to step aboard the train at Cumberland; get cinders in your eye looking out the window; heading for Union Bay; passing those blazing coke ovens that were going at that time; getting aboard City of Nanaimo or the Charmer, I've forgotten, there was the Joan also. But, my favourite vessel was the old Charmer, because as a lad engines always fascinated me. And in the Charmer, in the lounge, they had plate glass windows where you could stare down and watch those engineers working away, and those engines plugging away. That would fascinate us for hours.
My sisters, posthumous May, posthumous Evelyn, accompanied me on those trips. We'd go down into their dining room, and that plate, silver plate silverware, and the waiters would treat my sisters like princesses, and myself like a prince, while they waited on me. At least that's what it seemed to me at that particular time.

Then later, crawling into the top bunk of the boat, cruising down to Nanaimo, listening to the slap of the waves at night, the roll of the boat. I can recall one time, it was, I must have been quite young, and the waves and the crash of the waves against the boat, we must of been off in the Sound there, somewhere off of Hornby or Denman, sounded like we were going to not make it. But we did. [laughter]

Then the thrill of hearing the whistle as we entered Nanaimo harbour, blasted away. And I recall one time, when the propeller was whipping up the herring in the harbour. I feel awfully sorry for those herring. Those are little recollections that I had as a very small boy. And also, tramping up the old plank wharf, it was very steep if I remember rightly, from the old wharf up to the post office. Who met us, I don't recall exactly. But we had so many relatives in Nanaimo: there was the Hawthorthwaites, there was the Plantas, Martindale. So many that we had.

My sisters, I believe, used to go and stay with probably Dorothy Bate. Or the Plantas. Or the Martindales. But my favourite spot to go was also always to my Grandma Dixon's. Grandma Dixon and Grandpa Dixon, and Uncle Arthur, home was at the mouth of the Millstream. The fascination of boats always appealed to me more than going up to the houses where they had their beautiful gardens, and so forth.

Uncle Arthur was always my favourite uncle because he could tell more tales about old Nanaimo. And I don't know if Mr. Gough ever visited down there, but I remember a lot of the old timers, this is later years: Mr. Horne, Mr. Lewis, and a number of the old-timers would sit around there on summer evenings and chew the fat about old Nanaimo.

They used to say, "Well, it's city council we got; we're ruling Nanaimo right from here." A lot of those old-timers used to sit there by the hours in a summer evening. This is later.

When I visited Grandpa Bate, I would go to his house, right in this very spot we're sitting at tonight was where his home that I remember was located. I think the home was originally built by Dunsmuir, and later he occupied it. And Sunday afternoons, I can see Grandpa today, standing up at the head of the table, sharpening that knife, perhaps it was a leg of lamb or a leg of beef, I don't know. But I had to remain very careful, I had to watch my manners.

One peculiarity I remember about Grandpa Bate that I wasn't to drink, or we weren't to drink water with our meals. That was something, I don't know why, but I remember that as a youngster. I remember the coal grate fireplaces that were in the dining room. Look like very comfortable days when you look back now.
Occasionally, Grandpa, he was a pretty busy man, there was no doubt, we'd take a walk. And we'd walk around, and we'd talk. His main thought to me was always particularly about books. And I recall later, when he was up, somewhere up on the hill, Hecate Street I believe it was, he used to take me into the library, and before I left he always gave me a book to take home to read. I wish I'd kept on, kept them.

But, I remember one book that I did keep, it was Elbert Hubbard's notebook. And I remember one that I memorized, that I like very much, and it carried through with me for many, many years:

In the elder days of Art,
The workmen built with greatest care,
Each minute and unseen part;
For the gods see everywhere.

I've thought of that, I've repeated it sometimes to the boys in the shop, when somebody complains about a job or something, I repeat that. They're getting their... They say, "Well, cut it out, we've heard that too much!" [laughter] But I remember that.

And another one I remember, that I always liked:

If thou art worn and hard beset
With worries, that thou wouldst forget,
Go to the woods and hills!
Breathe the sweet air,
That Nature gives.

I'm repeating that because that always brought back to me that memory as a four, five, or six year old boy, when I saw those maple trees with the sunbeams coming through and the robins singing.

Perhaps that what I received as a youngster was the reason I loved to live in the country with a little bush around me. I still like to take my walks in the woods. Those are the impressions that Grandpa passed on to me. Other walks, I remember going up, and back along, I guess were looking up towards Mount Benson.

And then we'd turn around and we'd look over the Nanaimo harbour. I think Grandpa had back of his mind, once upon a time, that as his background as a youngster, his father was in the iron and steel business in Birmingham. I think he had a dream that someday we would have an iron and steel business here in this area, either here or Union Bay, because my dad used to talk about it also.

At that time, the complaint was we don't have enough iron ore. But what are we doing today? Look at the shiploads of our iron ore that are being processed in other countries. If his dream had of come true at that particular time, or my father's dream, would we have been a Sheffield or a Birmingham? In this area? Who knows?
But anyway, that's water under the bridge. I would say the essence of everything that Grandpa told me: "Think right, live right, and your days on this earth shall be many."

Thank you, Mr. [Chairman].

[applause]

[recording ends]

32:29