My life in Nanaimo (Lewis)
Transcribed by Jennifer Bolstler & Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University – September 24, 2015.

[tape quality is very poor]

William Lewis: This is William Lewis speaking for the Nanaimo branch of the British Columbia Historical Association, February the 25th, 1962. I will be 99 years of age on July the 17th. My home is 60 Dawes Street.

My father, William Lewis, left his native Wales in 1852, crossing the Isthmus of Panama to California. He returned to Wales in 1861 and married Theodosia Williams. Returned to California where I was born in [a mining camp] July the 17th, 1863. We were a family of four children.

0:57

The family left Port, San Francisco for Seattle, at the time a 2,000 population, in 1872. Leaving there for Victoria in October ’75 aboard the steamer Maude. When we arrived at Nanaimo shortly after. We were held up overnight on account of the current at Dodd Narrows … [unintelligible] … Captain Holmes was skipper.

My parents and my brother Richard are buried in the old cemetery on Wallace Street, now a beautiful park-like resting place.

I attended school on Crace Street. Mr. J. P. Planta was teacher. The building is still standing with a [business?] section added on in front. Where the hospital is now was a dense forest, as was most of the area, now the residential section.

2:09

Down by the Civic Arena was a camping place for Indians, northern, from the north, passing through these waters. Rows of canoes on the beach at the time.

I worked first at the general store [grocer?] Romano & Quagliotti, Victoria Crescent. Hours from 7:00 a.m. to midnight if any customers were around that late. The requisites are [unintelligible] but being able to speak Chinook, as business was conducted chiefly with the Indians. Wages were $10 per month with board and a room.

Money in those days were all gold and silver. I did not see paper money for years. After Dunsmuir would keep, Robert Dunsmuir would keep change of 5, 10, and 20 dollar pieces, and the banking was done through the purser on the boat. He deposited the money in Victoria.

Robert Dunsmuir's residence was at the foot of Albert Street. The stables and other outbuildings are on the corner of [Dunsmuir] and Douglas Street.
Dunsmuir drove a fast horse and buggy to the mines at Wellington.

In 1886 I worked for Mr. James Abrams in the general store. I married Mary Caldwell in 1890 at their residence on [Wallace] Street. I had been a member of the Presbyterian Church since 1894, a member of Ashlar Lodge Masonic for 70 years, a Rotarian for 41 years, an honorary member of the Native Sons and the Historical Association.

I remember seeing General William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, at a service January the 4th, 1895. I recall seeing Sir John A. Macdonald at a luncheon together with Robert Dunsmuir and other notables in the Royal Hotel, corner of Wharf and Commercial Street. The occasion followed Sir John arrived, the last spike, drove the last spike, of the E&N Railway near Shawnigan, August the 13th, 1886. The men in the party went down the mines to celebrate. The women[folk] were trying to keep close tabs on them, ha ha!

As a boy, we played hide-and-seek in and out of the Bastion. The 24th of May was always a [gala] day. Sports played on the green; water sports and canoe races held in front of the grassy slope where the Malaspina Hotel and the [federal?] building now stands.

On the 24th of May, Chief William Stewart would fire a 21 gun salute from the old cannon which now sits around the Bastion. Chief Stewart would have his boys whitewash the Bastion a few days before the big holiday. Chief Stewart is given the credit for saving the Bastion from destruction when the land on which it stood was up for sale. This lot was on the corner across the street.

As a young man, sailing was my chief recreation. And what a wonderful place Nanaimo is for that sport. Speaking of sails, I have seen sailing ships from all over the world in the harbour. Many of them waiting for coal or sandstone from Newcastle quarry. I'd like to say that the San Francisco Mint was built from the stone from Newcastle quarry. To see a big ship, sails furled, leaving the harbour was grand sight.

Judge Begbie was a familiar person on the streets of Nanaimo. Who held court on the water side of Front Street, opposite the Plaza Hotel.

I often think about the old pioneers of Nanaimo. Some of them were very colourful characters. There are so many of them that helped to make our city. Mark Bate was possibly the best known. He was our first mayor in 1874. He was elected 16 times as mayor.
On the day of the big explosion, when the ship Oscar blew up just outside the harbour, 13 windows had blown out in my home and two chimneys damaged.

Social life in Nanaimo was very pleasant. The [unintelligible] was in Bate's family turned permanent parks and social activity.

I served an apprenticeship for a year, 5 years, at the machine shop, commencing in 1879. I joined the Nanaimo Electric Light and Power Company in April 1897 as a [private] secretary and then became manager in 1910. Retiring in 1931.

[Rates] for lights were a dollar for one light, $3 up to 4 lights, of 16 candle power.

Coal was, for the boilers, cost a $1.45 per [one?] ton, delivered. That was 80 cents for the coal and 50 cents for the hauling.

I remember seeing the steamer, Beaver, on many occasions. Once ... [stuck?] ... on a rock in front of the post office. Princess Royal made several sailings in and out of the harbour.

Racing, horse racing, was a popular sport in Nanaimo in the early days. Races were held on Haliburton Street. The bars in that area did a good business between races. The best known horse was Sleepy Dan, he could always put lots of excitement in the race. And I may say that he was taken over to New Westminster on the 1st of July [one time] and raced on Columbia Street.

When people call on me for a visit, sometimes I have to ask them who their grandfathers were. I have literally lived here so long.

9:50

I'd like to tell this story. I'm often asked, what do you do? And this is what this story is told to me of a gentleman who was about my age. And I asked him, what he did.

He said, well in the morning, I got up and the first thing I get is the newspaper. I look over the obituary column and if my name isn't there, I go back to bed.

What a good day to [unintelligible] your presence. I hoped to have more to say on Nanaimo when I reach a hundred years.

I wish to thank Mr. W. Barraclough of the Historical Association for his time and help has given me.

10:45

William Barraclough
The meeting of the Nanaimo Historical Society, being a section of the British Columbia Historical Association, was held at the home of Mr. William Lewis, 60 Dawes Street. February the 25th, 1962, many members being present.

Concerning this tape recorded article, Mr. Lewis recited the story to me previously, when I wrote it down. After typing the story for his convenience Mr. Lewis read it in a clear voice, an amazing accomplishment for a gentleman of 99 years. His sight and hearing are very good. In conversation with Mr. Lewis after the tape recorded account, he spoke about many items of historical interest, some are noted here.

Mr. Lewis stated he did not see Sir James Douglas, but he remembers the telegram reaching here, announcing the death of Douglas August the 2nd, 1877. When asked about Sleepy Dan at New Westminster, he remarked with a chuckle, "Sleepy Dan won the race easily."

When we arrived in Nanaimo in 1875 there were 7 hotels, as the Identical by Donald Smith, the Oriental by John Hamilton, Black Diamond by W. Burton, Nanaimo by Edwin Gough, Miner's Exchange by Joe Webb, Commercial by Peter Sabiston, the Old Flag Inn by John Pawson. In later years the hotels and pubs numbered about 30.

This is William Barraclough speaking.

12:35

[end of recording]