Life and Times of Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken
Transcribed by Dalys Barney, Vancouver Island University Library
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William Barraclough:
The guest speaker at Nanaimo Historical Society October 17, 1972 meeting was Mr. Ainslie Helmcken of Victoria. Mr. Helmcken's subject was the life and times of his grandfather, Dr. John Sebastian Helmcken, an early medical doctor of Victoria. Mr. R.J. Walley presented Mr. Helmcken to those present. He recalled the many pleasant, social evenings he had spent at the Helmcken House many years ago when music was always a feature item. Mr. Harold Haywood expressed the appreciation of all those present at the close of the address, which had been most interesting, and informative, concerning the early history of the then Colony of Vancouver's Island and later Province of British Columbia.

This is William Barraclough speaking, who recorded the address.

R.J. Walley
Ladies and gentlemen, when I received the notice of this meeting, I was very delighted to see Mr. Barraclough's sketch of the Helmcken House. This brought back some very pleasant memories of the years 1910 and 11. During this period, I spent many enjoyable evenings, Saturday evenings, in this house, playing whist and talking to Dr. Helmcken, and enjoying music and singing with the younger members of the clan. Dr. Helmcken was such a modest gentlemen, little did I realize then, what a tremendous influence he had been in the formation of this province. It is with very great pleasure for me to introduce, his grandson, Mr. Ainslie Helmcken, who will speak about his illustrious grandfather. Mr. Ainslie Helmcken is now Victoria's City Archivist, and is doing a wonderful job in recording the history of the city of Victoria and district. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Ainslie Helmcken.

[applause]

2:33

Thank you very much Mr. Walley. [unintelligible] Ladies and gentlemen. It is a pleasure to come to Nanaimo, to be asked to speak on the life and the times of my dear, old grandfather. I think that first of all, we must discover for ourselves what type of a man was this dear, old soul. Naturally, I am prejudiced, very heavily prejudiced. But, others must have thought very highly of the dear, old soul, because just two weeks ago, on the 23rd, the 23rd of September, a little hospital was opened at Clearwater, up in the north Thompson area, and named the Dr. Helmcken Memorial Hospital. And this is 52 years after his death. So he must have made quite an impact on people throughout the province. Naturally, with us he did make a very great impression.
It was my very good fortune to have known Grandfather, and known him well for 20 years of my life. He was in his 97th year when he died. And up until about a year before his death, he was very clear of mind and he enjoyed reasonably good health for a man of his age and for the infirmities from which he suffered at the time. He even then at that time was particularly interested in the doings of the world on a day by day basis. He had to have The Colonist read to him from page one to the back of The Colonist. He wanted every item and if he suddenly remembered that there was an item that was usually in the paper and you happened to gloss over it, you were resoundingly thumped over the knuckles to go back and do your job properly.

Grandfather, may I say first of all, came out to Victoria, or to the Colony of Vancouver Island, he arrived here in March of 1850, having travelled by the sailing ship Norman Morrison. And taken just about six months to come around The Horn. It was quite an eventful voyage. Such little things as an outbreak of smallpox to contend with. A little ship that was a hundred and ten feet overall in length, bringing 80 souls, plus a crew. Which didn't give very much room for privacy. And there certainly was no means of isolation when something as, with epidemic potentiality, such as smallpox would break out. So Grandfather chose the alternative of having hammocks slung on the deck, and the patients were all put out in the fresh air and made to sleep in the fresh air. And the other people stayed under deck. And only one person, only one, only one life was lost to smallpox. And Grandfather often told me that he actually didn't die from smallpox, he died from other causes.

But he arrived in Victoria, as I say, in March of 1850. A bit of a dude when he arrived, dressed in his London finery. And he was put in charge of one of the Hudson's Bay men, who took a great delight in showing him about the district. And Grandfather, with his patent leather shoes and his London clothes, he saw that the paths that they were to follow were in the swampiest and muddiest parts of the fort that he could possibly find. It didn't take Grandfather very long to find that he had to have appropriate clothing for the life out here.

Now, if you can imagine, a man who was then in his 26th year when he arrived here. His career up to that time had been quite an eventful one. Because on his graduation, with a degree of MRCS at the age of 22 years, he first accepted an appointment as ship's doctor, to go for the Hudson's Bay Company, to Hudson's Bay itself. That was a voyage that he never wished to repeat. On his return he was given an appointment as ship's doctor, and this ship went right out to the Far East. And there he went through, as he told me, some of the largest bedbugs, and some of the most enormous cockroaches that he had ever seen in his life.

When he returned to England, after a voyage of, I believe it was a little over a year, he went again to the Hudson's Bay Company, and they said, "Oh, you are just the man we're looking for. We have an appointment for you, as ship's doctor and doctor to the staff in the Colony of Vancouver's Island."
"Where in the name of all that's good and holy is the Colony of Vancouver Island?" said Grandfather. "Because if it's in Hudson's Bay, I won't go."

But anyhow, he was prevailed upon, and here he was again, I stress, the London dude, finding himself dumped off in the middle of the fort area here. And it didn't take very long though, he was supposed to have actually, was supposed to have come both as surgeon to the Hudson's Bay staff and as secretary to Governor Blanshard. But as you all know from stories of history, that poor old Governor Blanshard, he didn't even have a chance when he got there, because Douglas outsmarted him at every turn in the road. And Grandfather never did get to be secretary to the Governor.

In fact, what happened to him, I don't think should have happened to anybody, because the Governor made him a justice of the peace, and sent him all the way up to Fort Rupert, to be the physician to the miners who were trying to get coal at Suquash, and also to minister to the Indians up there. Well, here was a little fort, set up, and which the total population was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 20 during the day, 30 when the miners came in at night, with about 3,000 strange Indians right outside the fort. And he charged as the justice of the peace, never having had anything to do with the administration of law. He had to try and tame the Indian tribes.

Well, it didn't take him very long to make up his mind that this was not his cup of tea. And he wrote a letter to James Douglas. Douglas at that time was at Fort Langley, and this letter was sent by a courier down to Douglas, asking him to accept his resignation and make arrangements for him to return to England on the Mary Dare, another sailing vessel. Douglas chose to ignore the letter altogether. And I presume that the ignoring of that letter was a good thing, was a very good thing for us, because it gave us a man who became dedicated to the development of the Colony of Vancouver Island, later the Colony of British Columbia, and finally, to the development of the, what turned out to be the Province of British Columbia.

12:17

Grandfather's stories are really outstanding. And I'm going to digress just for a moment, to tell you one or two things about his records. At the time of Grandfather's death, he had written, in 1892, he had written, five journals. An outline of his life. His life as a boy, as an apprentice to an apothecary, as an apprentice to a surgeon, and then his journeys. And then the fifth volume dealt exclusively with legislation in the province, or we'll call it the province because I don't want to keep repeating myself and say the Colony of Vancouver Island and so forth, but if I mention the province, then you'll please embrace the whole thing.
But he told me all these stories in 1917 and in 1918. Now how I was the chosen one to 
hear his tales, I don't know, but I presume it was because I went to see him one afternoon 
and I said, "Grandfather, I have just been sworn in to serve in the Royal Air Force, and I will 
be leaving in a week or two."

And I can see it right now, just as plainly as I could at that time, of this dear, old gentleman, 
taking a long, long look at me, and then getting the inevitable pipe, knocking it out, and then 
taking a long time to load it. Then banging on his cold cup of tea, he always had a cold cup 
of tea sitting beside him. And when he banged on the cup, the chinaman house boy came 
in, took the cup away, and brought him another hot cup of tea, which very shortly was cold. 
And then he lit his pipe, and he looked up at me, and he said, "Sit down boy." Well, when 
Grandfather told you to sit down, you knew you were in for a fairly long session.

And on that particular afternoon, this dear, old man, then, let's see, what would he be, 
ninety, about 93. For two hours, told me the story of his life, as a boy, and as a medical 
student. And when that session was over, he told me that I was to come back again, and 
he would tell me more. And it wasn't until I had come back from the Air Force, that he told 
me the story of Confederation, and his part in bringing British Columbia into Confede

Now I tell you all this, not to glamourize my part of the story, but, in 1927, we were getting 
ready to celebrate one of these great bits of history of Canada, which we always have when 
business, when we want to drum up a little bit of business and so forth. But on '28 was our 
60th, 60th anniversary of Confederation. And I was asked if I would tell the story about 
Grandfather at a banquet. So I went over to what you now know as Helmcken House, and 
Aunt Dolly, Mrs. Higgins, was there, and I said, "Aunt Dolly, I have to give an address about 
Grandfather at a dinner, to be attended by some very distinguished people, and I don't want 
to make a complete ass of myself, what can you tell me?"

So she pulled down these memoirs of Grandfather's. And together, over a period of two or 
three days, we read those things from beginning to end. Now the point I'm trying to make 
is, that here was a man who had written these things in 1892, when he would have been 
about 68 or 69, and then had told me the stories, in person, when he was about 93 or 
94. And the accuracy of his memories, compared with what he had written in his diary, was 
absolutely astounding. Word for word practically. So it must have been a great impression, 
made a great impression on his mind, as he wrote his memoirs.

As a consequence, these journals have become one of the prized possessions of history in 
British Columbia. There are many stories, there are many things, in the journals, that are 
not recorded anywhere else. It is a little difficult sometimes to, not to be able to confirm his 
opinions, but nobody else left any opinions.

When it came to Confederation, the three delegates who went to Ottawa, Trutch, Dr. 
Carrall, and Dr. Helmcken, Dr. Helmcken was the only one who kept a record, day by day,
of what happened down there. All that the others had were letters written home to their wives, we did such and such a thing on such and such a day. But he left a day to day record. And there is no, there is no argument about it, that without his records, we would be in a very sorry state to put all of our history together.

It might be a matter of interest to you, to me it is a matter of tremendous pride and satisfaction, that I have been asked by the University of British Columbia to edit his journals and to write a biography of the old gentlemen. And we are in the planning stage now, and I will be getting down to this work very shortly. It will truly be a labour of love. Because I am, as far as I can find out, from speaking to my sisters, my brother, to cousins and so forth, that I was the only one that Grandfather ever told his stories to. So I presume that this is the reason why they're after me to do them. And again, it will be done, as I've already said, with a great sense of pride.

20:12

Now to come back to the days in which they lived in British Columbia. There were a tremendous collection of characters of all types in the Colony. Wonderful men, men who today would rate very high for integrity and intelligence. Maybe they had not enjoyed the very greatest of education, but they had that knowledge that God gives people, a great deal of [horse]sense. Now you must remember that in the earliest stages of legislation, in the Colony of Vancouver Island, there was not a single soul who had ever had anything to do with government. Not a single soul. There were no books or precedents under which to conduct a legislature, such as they were carrying on at that time.

Grandfather finally got hold of an American book. And he used it as a bit of a guide, but not as a precedent. The conduct of legislation in those days was done with all of the decorum, which could be demanded in a House today. They were, they observed all the niceties. They conducted themselves as gentlemen. They carried on their debates in a very, very serious matter. And all this around a table which was made of rough wood and the Members of the House sat on a bench on either side of the table. And Mr. Speaker reveled in the fact that he had a bench all to himself at the head of the table.

And they sat with a big stove, which sometimes nearly baked them out of the room, and other times they froze to death. And they deliberated in the Old Bachelor's Hall, which if you are going into Victoria now, to give you the location of it, it would be where the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce sits at the corner of Fort and Government Street. And there was a school conducted by the Reverend Mr. Staines and his wife. Children brought in from the outlying trading posts and forts for education. They lived upstairs, and the floor had great big chinks, in between the planking, and sometimes the girls accidentally spilled basins of water. And the water would run through the chinks of the floor, and descend upon the legislators below.
And of course, it was always an accident. Grandfather told me this with great delight, because I think that he appreciated that the poor little kiddies were the subject of pretty stern discipline by Mr. and Mrs. Staines. They were stern disciplinarians. Which again brings me to the point that when I was a boy, we always heard of "good old Hudson's Bay" discipline. And good old Hudson's Bay discipline meant that you got your rumps paddled with a long handled hair brush or a razor strop. And there was no if's, and's or but's about it, that was stern old Hudson's Bay discipline. I don't think it did us any harm anyhow. Didn't change our shapes. [laughter]

But to come back to the early stages of the fort, after Grandfather got to Fort Rupert, the thing that got him out of there was that Governor Blanshard was taken ill, and there was no doctor to look after him. So, a courier, in an Indian canoe, was sent to Fort Rupert to bring Grandfather back to Victoria. Well, he was exceedingly happy to get away from the place, one can say. And on his way down to Victoria, he had a French-Canadian in the canoe, and two Indian paddlers. And the first night, they went ashore and camped above Campbell River, on one of the islands above Campbell River. It's not too clear to me exactly which one. But the Indians wouldn't go ashore there, because they knew perfectly well that the Campbell River Indians would do them in if they went to shore, because they were not good friends.

And Grandfather said, "Well now, I've been sitting in the bottom of the canoe, doing nothing, you fellows get the rest, and I will sit on watch." They had a fire. He had a musket beside him. And during the night he heard funny little sounds of ducks. They were splashing around in the water. He could hear sounds of the canoe scraping on the gravel of the beach where they had landed. And the call of wild birds. And at daybreak, when the others woke up and they were getting ready to leave, Grandfather looked around and ... no musket. They searched the island. They couldn't find the musket. This was one of the great mysteries of all time to him.

But about three months after, a Hudson's Bay man in Victoria walked up to him and said, "Doctor, is this your musket?"

And he said, "Yes, I lost that on the way down."

"Well, I have a message for you from the Chief of the Campbell River Indians. Please tell young Chief, do not sit by the fire. We can see you, you couldn't see us." And they had come ashore, and all the sounds that he had heard of the wild birds, of the canoe scraping on the gravel, these were all things which were engineered by the Indians themselves. Grandfather said that that was a lesson that he'd learned. And it was simply because he had befriended many of the Indians up there and they had made him an honorary chief before he left to come back to Victoria.
On his return to Victoria, Governor Blanshard had recovered from his illness, but then other duties were thrust upon him. He had to look after the supply of medicines to all the trading posts west of Winnipeg. And the outfits which came to Victoria would go away loaded down with sarsaparilla and some of the most ungodly concoctions that you could ever think of. And the bottles, in which his prescriptions were put up. Jallup was, of course, was something that went out to all the forts. Nobody dare get sick, or you had that combination of Jallup given to you. But medications in those days compared with the fact that we can run in and buy all these patent medicines today, with what they had to dish out in those days was, there's just no comparison at all.

Grandfather said, that in dealing with the Indians, that he had greater success with them by giving them a little sugar and water with a few drops of cochineal in it, because it wouldn't have done them any good, it was only the faith that they had in him to be able to cure. And the fact that they believed that he could cure them, they suddenly got very much better.

30:07

Well, then we went through the stages, the early stages of the Legislation. And one of his great stories is, being in the room where the Legislature was conducted. He had the duty to, as Mr. Speaker, of sweeping out the place, of making the fire before the Legislature met. And one day, he was making the fire and he looked up, and here was a tall, gaunt creature with a big, black hat and a long, black coat, and a beard, and he looked down on him, and he said, "If I were Mr. Speaker, I would not be doing that." And this was Amor De Cosmos' introduction.

And of course, as we all know, Amor De Cosmos later became quite a powerhouse in the Province of British Columbia, in the Colonies. He and Grandfather were never exactly "buddies", but they respected each other. They respected each other, like I would say, a couple of wild cats would respect some other kind of an animal.

But Grandfather said that in his later years, that there was a very fine line of distinction with Amor De Cosmos. That he could have been an exceedingly brilliant man, but just over that line was a man who was almost insane. And in his later years his mind did go. In all their years of feuding, and feud they did, it was a funny thing that in later years when Amor De Cosmos died, that the man who wrote his obituary was Grandfather. And the kindest obituary that one ever could have written or read.

But a funny little story about Grandfather and Amor De Cosmos, cause after all, I usually, I sort of specialize in little anecdotes. Two things as a matter of fact. De Cosmos fought with James Douglas all the time. His newspaper was designed principally to destroy, if he possibly could, the regime of Douglas. One day when they were crossing the James Bay Bridge, Amor De Cosmos encountered Dr. Ash, who was the Provincial Secretary. And Dr. Ash was an enormous man. He had hands the size of hams. And he was a powerful,
powerful creature. And during the session that day, this was after the construction of the bird cages, De Cosmos had made some very snide remarks about Dr. Ash, and Dr. Ash was ready to take it out on his hide. And he was about to pick him up and throw him over the edge of the bridge into the mud flats, when Grandfather and another one came along and brought about peace.

James Douglas said to Grandfather after, "Helmcken, you have no right to interfere in the operations of the Legislature outside the Legislative Chamber."

And Grandfather said, "But sir, he may of killed him."

And Douglas looked at him and he said it was one of the few times he saw him with a broad grin on his face and he turned around and walked away. It was too beautiful to contemplate.

But another little story, the second one, I asked Grandfather what Amor De Cosmos was like, what he was really like. What were his opinions, because, I said, there is a man that I would have dearly loved to have known. Isn't it funny that you meet a character in history and a type of an individual who had a little bit of larceny in his heart, which made him a particularly an interesting individual.

Well Grandfather looked at me and he said, "The best description I can give of Amor De Cosmos is that he was like a bad smell in a high wind." [laughter] He says, "You got him from every direction, but you never knew where he was standing." [laughter] And I thought it was a very apt description, because De Cosmos changed his opinion every day, if it suited him. And if it would bug James Douglas he would change positions just as readily as that.

36:02

Then there were all the great old characters who came out from the Hudson's Bay Company. Captain Langford, Langford, after whom Langford Plains were named and that is the Colwood Golf Club now in Victoria. Skinner, Skinner's Flats in the Esquimalt District near Naden and also Skinner's Bluff out above the lagoon at Esquimalt. And John Work, or Wark, as he more properly should have been known. John Wark was one of the real powerhouses of the Hudson's Bay Company. An Irishman, a man of tremendous ability, but how his named got changed from Wark to Work is another little anecdote.

When he was transferring from, I think it was the Northwest Company that he started with, to the Hudson's Bay Company, when they signed the register, they spelling his name W-O-R-K and he wouldn't argue with them about it, and so from then on he used the name Work. But other branches of his family still kept on with Wark all the time.

And then Finlayson. Finlayson, a man of tremendous character and tremendous
strength. One of the men I believe to be one of the great, outstanding men of Hudson's Bay history. Certainly as far as Victoria is concerned he must be considered to be one of the founders of Victoria. And Roderick Finlayson was a great favourite of Grandfather's. They were very, very close friends. As he was also with Kenneth McKenzie, who came out and ran the Craigflower Farm, and then later McKenzie's own farm out in Saanich. But he speaks with great affection of Finlayson. And I heard this story from Grandfather, and later was lucky enough to find it recorded in Finlayson's own journals.

Just imagine the strength of character of these individuals. Finlayson came from Scotland and crossed the Atlantic to New York. And there in New York he found a relative who had a connection with the Hudson's Bay Company. Through this he received an appointment to the Hudson's Bay Company and was ordered to report to Lachine, Quebec. To get there, he had to travel by, I've forgotten whether it is six or seven means of different types of transportation. And where you would travel from New York to Montreal or to get to Lachine, you could probably do it in two hours now, I believe it took him something like six days to do it.

He there was introduced to the Hudson's Bay Company, and the first thing that happened to him was he was sent up the Ottawa River to be in charge of a small fort and trading post. Now imagine a man who had never before seen an Indian in his life and had heard all the tales of the Indians and how frightening they were, being thrust into an Indian canoe with a crew of Indians to paddle him up to his first assignment. And imagine him later on, when he was assaulted, and darn neared killed by Indians at his first assignment. Well, he weathered that storm, and then they moved him further up the Ottawa River, where he was in charge of a bigger fort and trading post. And there he experienced the same kind of treatment. And at this point, a courier arrived, and this to me is one of the fascinating parts of our history. The courier arrived with a message for him that in six months hence, he was to report to James Douglas at Fort Vancouver, right on the other side of the Earth as far as he was concerned. Had never seen, he didn't know exactly where it was.

And so, the trek started, by canoe, by bateau, by horse, by every means of transportation, and finally by raft. Down the rivers, and he reached Fort Vancouver two weeks ahead of the appointed time. Imagine these men and what they had to do. Is it any wonder that the history, our early history, is so dependent upon the great characters, which who were involved in the building of this country.

And the next story of him, of Finlayson, is that he went with James Douglas, on the old Beaver, they came over and they took a look at Vancouver Island, never landed, they just travelled past the Island, and as he said a little later on, "Little did I ever expect that this was going to be my home." And they went to Alaska, where they took over the territories that the Russians had been occupying. And then he was left at a fort up there, where it rained for about nine months of the year, tremendously dismal place to be. And finally, he was moved over onto the Queen Charlotte Islands.
And there he met his bride-to-be. But this was not to be right away. Because he was whisked away from there to Victoria. And it was, I think, six years later, before the two of them could get together again. And then they were married. Finlayson was the number two man in the building of Fort Victoria.

43:47

Ross was the man in charge. Finlayson was his assistant. But within a year, Ross died, and Finlayson became the man in charge. And was in charge until Douglas transferred from Fort Vancouver to Fort Victoria, as the headquarters for the western part of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Finlayson then became one of the early members of the Advisory Council that Douglas set up when so ordered by London to get into a form of government out here. And he has left a great mark in the history of the Province of British Columbia. And he too left some journals, which were very, very valuable.

And then we came into a more modern set of characters. We came into a man by the name of W.J. MacDonald. W.J. MacDonald was our first senator to Ottawa. And one of the early mayors of Victoria. He was a Hudson's Bay man. He left the Hudson's Bay Company to open his own business, as a hardware merchant and so forth, when the, after 1858, when people could spend a little bit of money around the place. He went into business for himself. And W.J. MacDonald went to Ottawa. He kept very, very good journals. And I know Mr. Walley will remember Armadale his residence, out near Ogden Point.

And Senator MacDonald decided that the home was getting too old, and that it was time that he moved to a more modern place. So he bought a house in Oak Bay, and while they were moving, his daughter went outside and said, "Father, what are you doing?" Here was a great, big bonfire with all W.J. MacDonald's journals in the middle of it, burning up. Nobody will be interested. Nobody will be interested, he said.

And then, there was that sterling old character, Pemberton. The Commissioner of Lands for the Hudson's Bay Company and British Columbia, or the Colony's first Surveyor General. He would have had the office that your friend Jerry Andrews occupied for some time before his retirement.

46:51

Pemberton was a shrewd man. I tell this story at the risk that there are no Pembertons in this audience here tonight, because they always get annoyed when this story is told. But it has a great deal of humour attached to it, and I tell it only for its humour, I assure you.
Douglas was absolutely mad over the purchase of land. He believed that land would be the foundation of the fortunes of all his men, and he urged them to buy land. And one day, he bumped into this self-same W.J. MacDonald, and he said, "MacDonald, I have been looking at the books, and you have not bought any land, why?" And MacDonald said that he wasn't particularly interested in land.

He said, "MacDonald, I want you to go and look at this piece of property." And he described the property which embraced all of Gonzales, all where the Victoria Golf Club is, right back up to Rockland Avenue and St. Charles Street. "I want you to look at that."

MacDonald said, "Alright sir, I will." But first of all, he went over and he saw Mr. Pemberton, and he told him what he was going to do and he said, "I want some kind of a map, so I know what I'm doing."

He went away and he spent two days, climbing all over the rocks, and going over the whole thing, so that he knew what he was buying. And he came back to Pemberton, and he said, "Pemberton, I've decided to buy it."

And Pemberton looked at him and said, "Sorry old man, while you were out, I bought it myself."

[Laughter]

48:57

So these were the sterling old characters. And then we come, I think, to one of the most stirring parts of our history, and that is the making up of our minds as to whether we wanted to be Englishmen, Canadians, or Americans. And that must have been a most tremendously exciting time. I know that when my Grandfather described this part to me, he was almost emotional. And he was not an emotional man. But the more he thought about it, he actually emphasized things that he was saying, because he wanted to point to the real meanings of what was being done in bringing about Confederation.

Now he was accused, and is in some history books still, accused of being an annexationist, and he never was. In fact, if you look at the annexation petitions, you will never find his signature in any of them. But, he said that it was purely a matter of economics. That our trading was done with the United States, with the Territory of the Sandwich Islands, with Australia even, but we did nothing with Eastern Canada. We had no communication with Eastern Canada. So, what was the sensible thing for us to do? The sensible thing was to trade, or to join, where we were going to get the most for the farmers. Now here was the first man who stood up fighting for the farmers out in this part of the world.
And finally we came to Confederation. He was not too happy about the whole thing, but his story of Confederation is one that I will always cherish. He tells the story of a luncheon at Government House, when Governor Musgrave was laid up with a broken leg, and that in itself is a story, but I'm not going to tell you that tonight, because it would take far too long.

After one of the sessions, Grandfather went home and he sat down and he jotted down on bits of foolscap the terms that he thought, and the conditions which would fit, and be absolutely essential to British Columbia entering into Confederation. And he said, "I always had bits of paper sticking out of my pockets, on which I'd scribble notes."

The next meeting of the Council at Government House, Mr. Hamley, who was the Collector of Customs, happened to look at Grandfather's pockets, and here was this sheaf of papers, and on the outside of it were several notes written down on there. And old Mr. Hamley with his glasses right down on the end of his nose, got down and took a look at it, and he said, "What are all those notes you got there Helmcken? Bring them out and let's see what this is all about."

So after a lot of wrangling, out came the notes. And amongst them was his notation that there should be a railroad built from the Fraser Valley to Kamloops. And of course everybody was absolutely astounded with this. From then on, from Kamloops, there was to be a wagon road across Canada.

They always had lunch at Government House after these council sessions. And Trutch came up to him and he said, "Helmcken, I like your idea of the railroad, but unless we have a railroad that goes from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean, it means nothing. Now, will you back me up if I move that we have this railroad?"

And he said, "Yes, Trutch, I will. I'll give you my full support."

54:05

And that was in essence the embryo of the Canadian Pacific Railroad.

So here we have these men debating 3,000 miles away from the seat where the final decisions had to be made. And finally the telegraph comes. And Musgrave is communicating with them in Eastern Canada, telling them everything that is going on the Colony. And finally the delegates were sent to Ottawa. And, the three of them, as I've already said, Trutch, and Dr. Carrall, and Dr. Helmcken. Why two doctors, I don't know. But they went down there and they negotiated.

And as Grandfather said, "Everything that they had to argue about, Ottawa knew all about before they got down there." And they got practically everything that they wanted.
He returned to Victoria and brought the conditions, brought the terms back for discussion and for the approval of the Legislature. And then when Confederation came about, he retired from politics. And I think it would be a wonderful thing if some of the people in politics today would do exactly what Grandfather did. He was 47 years of age when he retired from politics. He said that he had served for 20 years without pay. He had sacrificed many things, some of the things in the education of his sons and so forth. It was time that he got back to his medical profession.

In those days, if they wanted you to run for office, there was no such thing as going around and getting your consent, and then going around and getting a bunch of people to sign a petition, or to sign your papers, whatever they call them, in these elections. They put an advertisement in the paper in those days. And the advertisement would say, would be called a requisition. And here were the requisitions of the citizens: Directed to The Honourable John Sebastian Helmcken, we the undersigned, etc. want you to stand for office for such and such a constituency. Then, he would have to put an advertisement in the paper saying that he agreed, or he declined to run. Well, in 1871, it was the first time that he declined.

He wanted to get back to his beloved medicine. But that was not the end of it. Sir John A. Macdonald, who became quite impressed with his performance in Ottawa, sent a letter requesting him to become the first Premier of the Province of British Columbia. Grandfather declined, and then they asked him to become a senator. And he declined. And at one time they offered him a knighthood, and he declined. He said he wanted to be just a plain citizen again. Which he became. But he became actually an elder statesman. It was to the embarrassment of the governments which it succeeded, and as you know, we never did get Confederation settled until, fact, we haven’t got it all yet. But about 1908 to 1910, we got most of it settled.

And every time they sent a delegation out from Ottawa here to try and straighten something out, the first thing the delegates did was to go and see Grandfather. Everyone knew the government would go and see Grandfather and discuss with him what it was they were out here about. And so, he was always involved in hot water of some kind or another with the then government.

And that I think, ladies and gentlemen, should be my allotted time tonight. I’ve spoken much longer than I intended to, because I’ve got a long drive back to Victoria tonight too. But it has been a joy to be here with you. And I hope at some future date that you would maybe invite me again.

[Here, here]

I’ll be delighted to come. I get a great kick out of coming to the various branches of the Historical Association. I spoke in Victoria on the 28th of September, and they betrayed
me. Because some dirty rat found out it was my birthday, and they made much ado about it. But nevertheless, I enjoy very much working with the Historical Societies, and even though some people call them the "Hysterical" Society, and I must admit, that on occasion, that I have used the term myself. But it is only because there is in their desire to protect those things which are precious to the history of a growing country. Actually, you know, we are not old enough to have a history yet. We need another hundred years to have a history, right now we have a heritage. And it's a heritage that we must, we must protect.

And I want to make one more observation, and then off I go. You were mentioning about the preservation of names of streets. Chapel Street and so forth here. Well now, I go through this frequently in Victoria in my capacity as Archivist for the City of Victoria, but I think I've now got it to the stage, where Engineering Department doesn't dare do any name changing without first of all coming down and talking to me about it. Because, about two and a half years ago, three years ago, I made a list of some 350 names of streets in Victoria, and their origin. And I gave them to radio station CFAX. And CFAX runs one of these just before the news broadcasts on the hour, periodically, they bring them up, wipe them off and play them over again. And this has had a very salutary effect on these people. They don't now like fiddling around with street names. So now, may I suggest sir, that you do the same and give it to your radio station here and get them to do the same. And this puts them on the spot. So, Heaven's sakes, good night.

[laughter and applause]

William Barraclough

At this point, the tape was just running out.

62:03

[end of tape]