

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s



F. J. Trapp Technical School, New Westminster.

A building with a macabre past

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A BUILDING WITH A MACABRE PAST

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Sometime this summer, or early in the fall, one of New Westminster's oldest landmarks will fall victim to demolition crew hammers.

Construction of the new senior high school has sounded the demise of BC's first provincial jail, better known here as the old Trapp Technical school, where two generations on New Westminster boys and girls have undergone manual and domestic arts training.

Crashing jar of the trap door

It is a building with a macabre past.

During the last 35 years its red brick walls have echoed to the strident discords common to any gathering of teenage students, but prior to that the sounds came from marching prisoners' feet, the groaning laments of condemned men, and the crashing jar of the trap door on the scaffold being sprung.

Date of the construction of "old Tech" isn't clear. Public accounts for the year 1873 show estimates for the operation of the "provincial jail at New Westminster" and authorized salaries for a jailer, an assistant jailer, a senior convict guard and a convict guard with a total annual budget of \$4864.

Whether the Colony's first prisoners were housed in the present structure is not known, but certainly by 1879, when the legislature passed the first Prison Regulation Act, the jail was in full use.

Eighty-two-year-old Alex Turnbull, one of Canada's great field lacrosse players, and the only living former warden of the old jail, could shed little light on the early history of the building as he is a "Johnny-come-lately," who arrived in

Caption

BC's first provincial jail, for the last 35 years known as the "old Trapp Technical High School" will be razed sometime this summer or fall, following the shift of pupils to the new joint high school at Eighth street and Tenth avenue. A building with a macabre past, a total of 31 men were hanged on the scaffold in the prison yard.

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

Royal City in 1897.

The jail's peak capacity was 175 prisoners recalls Warden Turnbull, and they were handled by a staff of 15, including a matron, who kept tab on a few female inmates at the jail.

Bread and water in solitary cell.

"I can't say they were a rough lot," said the warden from his lovely garden at 1076 Fourteenth avenue, "because we had very little trouble with our prisoners."

He indicated, however, that prison discipline in those days was stern, and trouble makers were quickly punished, usually by being placed on bread and water in the solitary cell in the prison basement.

Through the years, Trapp Tech's solitary confinement cell has become a student legend, surrounded in mystery and humour.

Exact location of the cell was lost when the prison was remodelled into a school in 1921. When the women's dormitory was enlarged and the floor lowered to make the electrical shop, the earth displaced was dumped into the dark, windowless basement.

Generations of Tech students have referred to the half-filled basement as the "smoke hole." When the teachers weren't looking the pupils would drop through the small trap-door in the floor of a lumber storage room and enjoy a quiet smoke in the murky depth of the chamber.

In the minds of most students, there was little doubt that more than one prisoner of the old jail had perished while chained in the solitary cell. Some even told of iron staples, embedded in the brick walls, from which shackle-irons once hung.

A few years ago, girls of the Tech's Hi-Y club capitalized on the legend and erected a grave in the corner of the basement, on which they stretched the arts class's famous skeleton. Boys of the school were then invited to view the "famous dungeon" at five cents per visit.

Secret of lost mine dies with him

According to Warden Turnbull the prison grounds occupied much the same area encompassed by the present old Tech building, while the vegetable gardens stretched north on Eighth street to Queens avenue and west to McInnes street.

There was no Simcoe street dividing the property as now, and the warden recalls that for many years, residents of the city used to cut through the property until a well-defined

Newspapers and Magazines 1900s

path was established. Eventually, by right of access, the path became a public walk and later a road.

According to government records, the first man hanged in the jail was Tah-ak, an Indian who went to his death January 6, 1863. Recorders in those days weren't much concerned with names, for the first five men hanged in the jail are recorded simply as "Tah-ak, Jim, Erhan, Moise, and Jim alias Charlie."

The scaffold was erected in the prison yard, now the site of the school's boiler house. The sixteen-foot wall surrounding the scene, failed to smother the morbid curiosity of the early Royal City residents, however, for crowds used to assemble on the slope of the hill above the yard and witness the grisly action.

Perhaps the most famous, or mysterious man executed in the jail was the Indian "Slumagh," who went to his death January 16, 1891, with the secret of Pitt Lake's famed gold mine locked in his breast.

Slumagh is supposed to have hit New Westminster with his pockets bulging with gold, dug from a secret horde in the mountains behind Pitt Lake. He would not reveal the location of his mine, and during his celebration on Columbia street, killed a man in a fight. The story goes that jailers begged him to reveal the mine's location, even as they placed the rope around his neck.

Four hanged on one January day

And January 31, 1881, was probably the busiest day any hangman ever had in BC. On that day Alex Hare and the three McLean brothers, Charlie, Archie and Allen, were hanged for the robbery-murder of a Cariboo rancher.

Although records do not establish the facts, it is believed that Henry Jones was the last man to die on the Tech gallows. Two years later the jail was moved to Oakalla.

Prisoners were housed in wooden cells, constructed of laminated two-by-fours, and three tiers high. The main cell block is now the woodworking shop.

The warden's quarters were located on the south-east corner of the building, and the Turnbull tenure of office brought a situation, unique in the world.

During Alex Turnbull's term as warden, his son Robert was born in the warden's quarters. Robert later returned to the same building to go to school, and today Robert's son, Robert junior is a pupil in the institution.