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A Pioneer's Story
[*John Mathewson 1840-1932*]
by R N Faulkner

John Mathewson was born in Melbourne in 1840 after his parents had emigrated from Scotland. His father, Richard Mathewson, son of schoolmaster Alexander Mathewson and his wife Isabella Fraser, was born in Tiree in 1807. Richard Mathewson married Barbara Stewart in Edinburgh in 1835, and in 1837 they set sail for Australia on the ship "North Briton". Richard Mathewson died in Melbourne in 1860. Barbara Mathewson née Stewart died in South Melbourne in 1886.

To live for almost a century in the place of his birth, and to see, as the years roll past, the growth of a mighty city, from the most humble village to the vast metropolis that is Melbourne to-day, is an experience that is denied to most men, but one which has fallen to the lot of Mr. John Mathewson, of Gladstone House, Victoria street, North Melbourne.

Mr. Mathewson was born on 29 February, 1840, in a small cottage which was rented by his father in William-street, near the corner of Collins street. The story told by him is a romantic one, mingled with sadness as he speaks of the playmates of his youth, nearly all of whom have passed away. Today, almost alone in the world, the old man gazes in retrospective mood from the window of his room, far above the whirling traffic and the hurrying crowds. His thoughts roll back through the years that have gone, of the friends who have departed, and as he gazes he once more sees with dimming eyes the fields and scrublands where as a child he loved to ramble.

Mr. Mathewson's parents were married in Edinburgh in 1836, and left in the sailing-ship 'North Britain,' of about 700 tons, the same week to settle in Australia. The ship was sailing down the Irish Channel when it was cast ashore on the coast of Cork. After a delay, in which the vessel was repaired, they once more set sail, only to be again wrecked a month later on the island of Madeira. Eventually, after many trials and tribulations, they arrived in Fort Jackson in 1836. The same year they left Sydney in the small schooner 'Kate' for Melbourne, then but a small village. Mr. Mathewson's father made the journey to take up a situation in a new ironmongery store which had just been opened by Mr. H. W. Mason, the first store in Melbourne where a pound of nails could be purchased. On arrival in Melbourne he rented a small cottage in William street, where Mr. John Mathewson was born in 1840.

Mr. Mathewson told me that he could distinctly remember John Pascoe Fawkner, who was a close friend of his father. "He was a most handsome man," said Mr. Mathewson, "and I remember that he used always to wear a most peculiar velvet skull cap. At that period, as the business and commerce was conducted in the western half of the city of today, and where the eastern portion now throbs with life, were open fields and clumps of dense scrub. The Western Market was a shed containing four stalls, and the streets were unmade and unlighted.

One of the most vivid moments of Mr. Mathewson's early life was when he stood with other small boys outside an enclosure near the old Melbourne goal to watch the public execution of three criminals who had been convicted of robbery. The gallows were placed high up on the walls and in full view of the spectators; the ropes were placed about the necks of the men, and together they were dropped out of sight behind the walls.

When he was aged seven years, Mr. Mathewson was sent with his elder brother, Alexander, to be educated at an academy conducted by a Mr. MacGregor and his son John. The fee was £2/10/ a quarter for both of them, and Mr. Mathewson still has the receipts for the money which his father paid.

All the ships at that time were sailing vessels, and Mr. Mathewson has seen them towed up the river by their crews. The sailors walked along the river bank hauling the towrope and singing their songs of the sea. In 1848, when the waters of the Yarra reached and covered what is today Flinders lane, Mr. Mathewson and other small boys paddled in search of oranges which had been stored on the wharf and had been swept away by the flood waters. At the time of the flood he was living with his parents in the first brick cottage erected in King street.

The first cemetery in the settlement was on the Flagstaff Hill, but there were no grave stones there. The flagstaff was used as a means of signalling to ships coming up and going down the bay, and here on Sundays all the population of the small settlement gathered to learn the latest news.

The arrival of small ships was notified by hauling a basket to the yardarm, while the arrival of the intercolonial ships was announced by a display of flags. There was a fixed telescope on Flagstaff Hill, which worked on a swivel. "It was a most common sight to see bullock drays in Collins street," said Mr. Mathewson, "and the road was unmade and very boggy." Questioned regarding the policing of the city in its infancy, Mr. Mathewson said that he could dimly remember of a troop of mounted black policemen, and that later the 40th Regiment of British soldiers was garrisoned in the settlement, and had a camp down past where the Spencer street railway station stands today. Mr. Mathewson has a distinct recollection of 400 members of the Kings 40th Foot Regiment leaving to take part in the affair at the. Eureka Stockade at Ballarat, and he was personally acquainted with many of the soldiers, one of whom taught him to play the flute.

After leaving school, when aged about 14 years, Mr. Mathewson was sent to work as office boy for Mr. James Robertson, who had at that time been appointed to audit and examine the finances of 'The Argus.' He remembers Mr. Edward Wilson's first partner, James Stewart Johnson, and was at the office of Mr. Robertson when Mr. L. Mackinnon and Mr. Edward Wilson became partners in 'The Argus.' He recalled the time, when 'The Argus' office was situated in Collins street west, and when the office was removed to the old building in Collins street. Mr. Mathewson's father was a shareholder in the Hobson's Bay Railway Company and in the first gas company established in the city.

When he was aged 14 years of age, Mr. Mathewson was apprenticed to a firm of drapers, Adamson, Finlay, and Co., and was known as the cash-taker. His duties were to sit behind a desk near the door of the shop and to take cash from the cash boys who brought the money to him. When a customer had purchased goods the money was handed to the salesman, who in turn gave it to the cash boy, who took it to the cash-taker. If any change was required the cash boy would take it back to the salesman, who would give it to the customer. In the course of his daily duties, Mr. Mathewson, although aged only 14 years, would sometimes handle as much as £800, and he had to balance the books before he left for home. His salary was £40 a year. One of the cash boys who used to take the money to him was a little fat, pleasant natured lad called Bob Reid. He later founded the firm of Robert Reid and Co., of Flinders lane. About this time the Burke and Wills expedition set out to cross the continent, and Mr.

Mathewson was one of several hundreds of people who gathered to see the departure of the expedition.

After journeying round the goldfields of Victoria for several years Mr. Mathewson left to search for gold in New Zealand. Finding the metal scarce he returned to Melbourne in time to take part in the census of 1871. He entered the office of the Government statist in 1874 and retired in 1902 from the position of accounts-keeper.

Despite his 90 years of struggle with life, Mr. Mathewson is today an active man. He climbs three flight of steep steps to his bedroom; he reads and writes as well as ever he did; his hearing is unimpaired, and his hair is abundant, though slightly grey. He explains the perfect health at the ripe old age by the fact that he has always smiled on life and has taken the knocks with the hope that better times were coming. He has smoked since boyhood, but for 30 years has been a total abstainer from strong drink. His memory is accurate, and his ability to recall names which have never passed his lips for half a century is surprising.

Contributed by Chrissy Fletcher sourced from a post by Anne Therese Courtney on Pioneers Victoria Facebook Group.