

British Columbia's First Natural History Society

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The initiative to form the first natural history society in BC came from three men: Jack Fannin, Edward Hassel, and Charles Newcombe. Triggered by the recent creation of the provincial museum, the men identified the need for a group of amateur enthusiasts who would work with, and for, the museum.

On December 2, 1886 the Provincial Museum of Natural History and Anthropology opened its doors to the public. The museum's stated purpose was the "constant exhibition of natural products—mineral, vegetable, and animal—of the Province." The first curator was one of the three, Fannin.

Jack Fannin was a man of many talents including taxidermy. He also wrote articles for such outdoors magazines as *Forest and Stream* and *Canada West*. By 1884, Jack Fannin was a respected member of the BC community, with an unrivalled knowledge of BC's hinterland and its wildlife.

Frequent reports in the *Daily Colonist* reinforced requests for additions to the collection by listing donors and donations. Because shotguns were widespread in the community at the time, the cause acquired many birds, large and small.

The other members of the founding trio were Edward Hasell, a cultured man who enjoyed a wide range of interests including natural history and Charles Frederick Newcombe MD. After studying medicine at Aberdeen, Charles came to Victoria in 1883, but found it difficult to establish a viable practice. With no viable practice, Charles had time for his avocations of archeology and natural history. He joined in collecting specimens for the new museum, which brought him in touch with Jack Fannin.

The three newcomer friends—Fannin, Hasell, and Newcombe—discussed an idea. Why not form a club including those people known to be interested in natural history? They called an exploratory meeting on March 6, 1890, in Fannin's room, to draw up a proposed constitution for such an organization, to be adopted at a second meeting on March 26. In the event, "more than forty gentlemen signified their wish to join the society."

The original constitution and bylaws of the Natural History Society of British Columbia stated the objectives as "to acquire and promote a more extended knowledge of the Natural History of the Province, and to act as an independent auxiliary to the Provincial Museum."

The society immediately began a series of fortnightly lectures in a room adjoining the legislative library. Throughout the ensuing year the society heard talks on natural history and other topics. It had become clear that the members' interests included anthropology, which matched the objectives of the museum. In addition to lectures, the society organized field excursions. Any specimens collected on such forays were destined for the museum's collections. Their excursions, as well as providing opportunity for more serious fieldwork, became popular social events.

At the time of the annual report for 1890/91, the society's membership included 54 residents in Victoria, four near Shawnigan Lake, two each in New Westminster and Comox, and members in Massett, Enderby, and Vancouver, for a total of 65 members.

Starting in December 1897, the Natural History Society enjoyed the use of the splendid new reading room adjoining the new



On April 12, 1890, members of the Natural History Society of BC made the first of their Sunday field excursions to Cadboro Bay. Image B-09586 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

legislative library for their meetings. The membership had grown and now included several professional scientists, such as C.C. Pemberton and James R. Anderson, the first deputy minister for agriculture. These two, together with Professor John Macoun, established and built the museum's botanical collection. Ladies could now join as members but would form a separate branch and could not serve as officers or on committees.

Fannin's failing health forced his resignation. His replacement was not Dr Newcombe, as widely expected, but the deputy curator, Francis Kermode. He deliberately distanced the society from the museum. Nonetheless, the members persisted. They found a new venue for meetings and their extensive library in the use of a room in the Carnegie Library building, declaring it to be "very pleasant quarters."

In March 1914, an editorial in the *Daily Colonist* highlighted and praised the work of the society:

"Its greatest benefit will be in creating here an atmosphere of culture, by which we do not mean mere superficial refinement of manner, but an attitude of mind towards the various aspects of Nature, an intelligent interest in every phase of animate and inanimate things."

Over the decades following the First World War, activity by the Natural History Society of British Columbia dwindled. The society became inactive by 1930 and finally dissolved three years later. In 1944, a new organization, the Victoria Natural History Society, began to function, and it flourishes to this day. ♣

This article is adapted from the author's book, *In Nature's Realm; Early Naturalists Explore Vancouver Island*, for release October 2019.