

TC MAR 20/88

31 BASTION SQUARE

# None could match the Board of Trade Building

The talk of the town in the first half of the 1890s was the fine building erected by the Board of Trade, now known at the Chamber of Commerce.

Victorians were so proud of the new landmark that they took visitors to see it, as they did to see the red-plush grandeur of the Driard Hotel and that splendid seaside retreat on the Oak Bay waterfront, the Mount Baker Hotel where the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York, later King George V and Queen Mary stayed in 1901.

According to a *Colonist* story in 1891 there was, it appears, at the time, a boom all over the continent in Board of Trade buildings; "Chicago started it with one of the most magnificent piles on the continent, a 12-storey structure with eight towers, all of solid granite and marble."

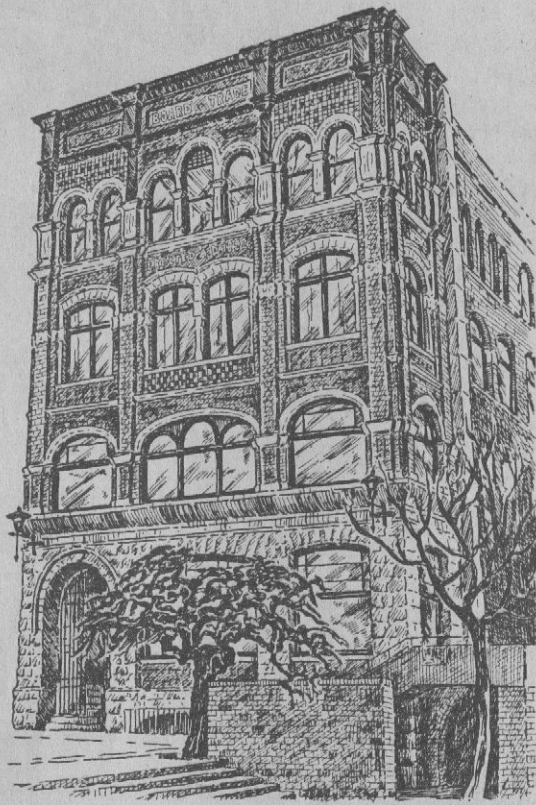
And because "Victoria, seldom, of late, is very far behind in the march of civilization" there would be a Board of Trade building in this proud capital of British Columbia, the city which had once been a rude fort on the shores of the harbor, surrounded by wilderness."

*The Colonist* went on: "On the corner of Bastion Square and Helmcken Alley, on the site where, since the earliest days of Victoria's history, several rickety wooden shanties have existed, will be started the erection of a handsome brick and stone pile which will overshadow everything in its immediate vicinity, and present to the eyes of all a building unlike in form, design or arrangements of anything else in the city.

"The general style of treatment is that of the free Italian of the Renaissance period, and the beautiful light form of architecture is brought out in all its detail by the graceful front elevation."

Work was rushed ahead and by September of 1892 the cornerstone was laid, *The Colonist* saying that "a small, but select audience" witnessed and took part in the ceremony.

"In the cavity of the block of Saturna Island granite were placed a copy of the rules of the



Barry King

## ■ BOARD'S landmark survives

Board of Trade, and specimens of each of the coins of Canada — year 1892.

"These relics will become possessed of value far beyond their intrinsic worth by the time the rising edifice becomes a ramshackle specimen of the architecture of other days among the stately blocks of iron and granite that are to make the Victoria of the future.

"President Hall laid the mortar with great taste, and also with a bright new trowel, and...

Mr. R. P. Rithet trimmed the edges and 'trued' the stone in a very workmanlike manner."

The dinner, in May of 1893, to mark the opening of the Board's new building, like the building itself, was the talk of the town.

The *Victoria Times* reported: "The members of the Board of Trade can today look back with pride and pleasure upon the efforts which made the annual banquet last night such a pronounced success.

There were at least 20 speeches, but Mr. R. P. Rithet, who had been Mayor of Victoria in 1885, seems to have made the hit of the evening when he proposed the toast to the Senate and the House of Commons.

He is reported to have said "he did not know that he could say much about the Senate, which, although a useful body, no doubt, some people saying so, was more ornamental than useful. If there had been any Senators present he did not know that he would be bold enough to say this."

The chair was occupied by President Hall, and with him at the head table was indeed a group of notables: Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney, Chief Justice Sir Matthew Baillie Begbie, Capt. Hughes-Hallet of H.M.S. Garnett, J. B. Metcalfe of Seattle, Col. E. G. Prior, M.P., Mayor Robert Beaven, Ald. Dennis R. Harris, United States consul Levi P. Meyers, Thomas Earle, M.P., Judge Swan of Port Townsend, Hon. Theodore Davie, T. J. Trapp, president of the New Westminster Board of Trade, J. C. Keith, president of the Vancouver Board of Trade, R. P. Rithet and W. C. Ward.

This dinner, like most such affairs in the gay 90s, ended at 4 o'clock in the morning. Considering such an all-night session and the amount they ate, we may well ask this question: were Victoria's businessmen then tougher and more durable than they are today?