

## VANCOUVER IN 1899

One of the themes in *THE SILK TRAIN MURDER*, set in 1899 Vancouver with a background of the Klondike Gold Rush, is the clash of cultures at the end of the Victorian era and the dawn of the modern age.

The west coast at that time was in many ways the last frontier. Vancouver had only existed for 13 years, and while it had electric lights, streetcars and telephones, the sidewalks were made of board and the city was still surrounded by forest. What is now pricey Yaletown was then mudflats and a notorious red light district on the edge of Chinatown.

Vancouver came into existence because of the CPR; what had been a small mill-town with a couple of bars and not much else became the western terminus and the link to the Orient. By 1899, the CPR had three sleek steam liners, the *Empresses of India, of China and of Japan*, carrying passengers, tea and other cargo between into the Port of Vancouver each month. The costly silk, insured by the day, was rushed to New York in specially designed silk trains, known as *The Silks*, which became the target of every crook across the continent. A silk train consisted of only an engine, caboose and six or seven specially lined steel cars holding silk. When *The Silks* were coming through, every other train on the tracks was shunted to one side, as competition was fierce between the Canadian and US rail lines for the lucrative trade.

The Klondike Gold Rush had brought an influx of wealth to Vancouver in the years 1897-1899 as hopeful gold seekers sought provisions and passage north. The area along the waterfront thronged with bars and merchants catering to the would-be gold miners. Population growth and a real estate boom drew still more people to the young city. The cultural influences of the day were a mix of British, Canadian and American, reflecting the local demographic. Vancouverites were as proud of their new Opera House as they were of the 1,000 acre Stanley Park, dedicated in 1889.

Vancouver in 1899 did have its own police force, with a Chief and six constables. Unfortunately, half the force was under investigation for corruption that year, including accusations of accepting bribes to turn a blind eye to the activities of the “ladies” on Dupont Street. By the following year, several of the force, including the Chief, were forced to resign. And the one-armed jailor? – he was often as drunk as some of his charges.