

VICTIM OF PROGRESS

By George Inglis

Veteran landmark disappears under bulldozer's crunch

A pile of dusty, red bricks, chunks of weathered cement and heaps of splintered, broken lumber, scattered over the turf-scalped side grounds is all that is left now of a venerable provincial government building across from the Douglas Building on the corner of Government and Superior Streets.

A large, bucketed bulldozer roared in and out of a gaping hole in the side wall, tearing out the insides of what used to be the old carpenter shop of the public works.

A victim of progress, this was the second time around for the elderly, out-dated building to receive its demolition death sentence.

BUILT IN the early years of 1890, it first came into the public eye when a young Englishman, Thomas Plimley, arrived in Victoria, about then, and opened a bicycle shop in part of it.

The name Plimley is alive and flourishing today, both in Victoria and Vancouver, as an automobile firm specializing in import English cars, since the year 1893.

Thomas Plimley, with his wife,
Sunday, October 8, 1978
PAGE 15—The Daily Colonist

originally intended to settle in Winnipeg, but he saw so much mud, and felt so cold, that he put his wife right back on the train and continued west to Victoria.

There was a slight green grocer flavor about Tom Plimley's first venture into the bicycle business. His partner was a man named Onions.

Plimley was a very good engineer and mechanic. He soon graduated from bicycles — and Onions — to automobiles. When he started his automobile agency, his first garage and sales room was in the now-demolished carpenter shop on the west side of Government Street, near the corner of Superior Street. He opened shop in 1893.

FARSEEING, and thinking modern, Plimley realized the automobile would eventually become a basic necessity in the new way of life. How true! His garage was the first place in Victoria where auto owners could fill up their gas tanks from a pump. Those, too, were the days when the speed limit in that city was 10 miles an hour; in the country, 25 miles an hour.

In his dealership lines, Thomas Plimley handled 11 different makes of autos, ranging from Ford, the English Austin, through Daimler, Humber to the two-cylinder Buick and the luxury air-cooled Franklin. Later, he sold the first Chrysler car in Victoria.

In those pioneer days, when cars were first shipped to Canada from England, they arrived in sturdy wooden crates, made of tongue and groove lumber. Records show that at least one thrifty person, out Cordova Bay way, decided this lumber was too good to waste. He collected the crates from Plimley's and built himself a house.

It must have been a scarecrow sight before receiving its final

coat of paint. Signs on the crated sides were stencilled: "Store away from boilers," "This end up," and, "Consigned to Thomas Plimley."

THEY WERE colorful and exciting times in the infant days of Victoria's automobile industry. As well as automobiles, Plimley handled gramophones and Harley-Davidson motorbikes.

One time Plimley took an order for an English Austin car for a client, Frank Rattenbury, the wealthy architect who built the British Columbia legislative buildings.

Rattenbury travelled to England, visited the Austin works, paid for the car there, and left a commission for Plimley. Financial times were not good for the Austin firm just then, so, instead of passing the cash commission on to Plimley, they offered him shares in the motor company. Plimley took them and, later, made enough on the sale of them to pay for a pair of fine shot guns.

A STORY appeared in the Victoria papers around 1908, that eager, and often, inefficient car drivers would enquire from Plimley the time and in what direction he was taking his next Sunday drive. Then they would leave an hour or so earlier, and travel that route.

If they got into driving or mechanical difficulties, they knew that, sooner or later, kindly Plimley would chug along, stop, and straighten things out for them. Many were the late Sunday evenings that Plimley would arrive home from his pleasure drive, covered with mud and grease from head to toe. He would just smile. It all helped him to sell automobiles.

Plimley always took along a relief driver on his Sunday jaunts —

his wife. It is believed she was the first woman to drive a car in Victoria. Dedicated to the new pastime, she used to practice manoeuvring in the seclusion of the Plimley apple orchard.

In 1907, the British Columbia government, feeling the need for building expansion, bought out all the property owners on the west side of Government Street and the north side of Superior, between Government and Menzies Streets.

They had decided to move away, or pull down, all the buildings. This decision led to Plimley moving his Plimley Automobile Company, Incorporated on Oct. 21, 1907, to a new site on Johnson Street, in 1910.

RE-EVALUATING the situation, government officials decided to spare the sturdy, solid garage building with the pleasant display windows looking out on to government Street.

Instead of demolishing the building, they turned it into a carpenter shop for public works. And, thus, it has stood, venerable but useful, echoing the sounds of saw and hammer for the past 71 years.

Its ignoble end came during the week of Aug. 26, 1978, when the firm timbers and still useful red bricks, bit the dust as the roaring, grinding bulldozer levelled the veteran.

There is a suggestion the bleak area will be smoothed over, black-topped, marked with area lines and become a parking lot to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of automobiles seeking space.

If so, it will bear out, and give substance to young Tom Plimley's belief, back at the turn of the century, "the automobile will become a basic necessity in the new way of life."