

The Western Canadian Fish Company

Researched and written by: [Ralph Drew](#), Belcarra, BC, December 2021.

“The first Canadian company to engage in cod fishing on the Pacific banks was the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’. This company built a home station at ‘Barnet’, British Columbia, in 1903 and sent the brigantine ‘Blakeley’ to the Bering Sea. The company struggled along until the latter part of 1905, when it went out of the business.” ⁽¹⁾



Source: University of Washington Library, Digital Collections, Item: FMB_44264.

Western Canadian Fish Company, Barnet, B.C., circa 1905.

In 1887, extension of the CPR rail line along the south shore of Burrard Inlet to the newly incorporated ‘City of Vancouver’ created new opportunities for businesses that needed transcontinental railway transport.

In 1889, ‘Barnet’ was established as a company town for the ‘North Pacific Lumber Company’ by business partners James MacLaren and Frank Ross, and by 1899 the lumber company had a thriving business in the area. James MacLaren named the settlement after his mother whose maiden name was Elizabeth Barnet. ⁽²⁾

In 1900, work started ⁽³⁾ on the ‘Hastings–Barnet Wagon Road’ that was eventually completed in 1903 (see photos below). ⁽⁴⁾ By 1905, Barnet had a school (first one built in 1899), a post office, a general store, and a population of 250 which rivaled the unincorporated town of Port Moody.

In 1903, the B.C.E.R. power lines from the new ‘Lake Buntzen Power House’ were completed that required a pole line 17 miles (27 km) long and which crossed Burrard Inlet at Barnet Beach on two steel towers. Two wooden pole lines followed the ‘Barnet Wagon Road’ (see photos below) to the ‘Pole Line Road’ (later, ‘Sperling Avenue’), with one going to the Vancouver Substation via Hastings Street and the other line going south to the Burnaby Substation. ⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾

In March 1902, a new company called ‘Western Canadian Fish Co., Ltd.’ incorporated with capital of \$100,000 (about \$2.2 million today). The objectives of the company were to purchase the Whitman patent for curing fish — which used artificial heat to dry fish — and to enter into a fishing and fish curing business in the province of British Columbia. ⁽⁷⁾ At that time, John Boyd was president of the company, and the directors named were Robert Kelly, Robert Robertson, E.W. MacLean and J.D. Roberts. ⁽⁹⁾

In November 1902, the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ purchased the brigantine ‘Blakeley’ at a sale in Victoria instituted by the Admiralty Court. ⁽⁸⁾ The brigantine ‘Blakeley’ — built at ‘Port Blakeley’ in 1872 — was a vessel of 144 registered tons capable of carrying 300 tons of fish. ⁽⁹⁾ The company also announced its intention to build a large drying-house fully equipped with a plant for the preparation of dried fish using the Whitman process. ⁽⁹⁾

In December 1902, the 'Western Canadian Fish Company' announced that it had purchased 79 acres (32 ha) of land with ¼-mile (400 m) of waterfront on the south shore of Burrard Inlet (District Lot 212, immediately adjacent to 'Barnet' — see map below), and that construction of fish-curing sheds and a warehouse would begin at once to be ready by April 1st, 1903. ⁽¹⁰⁾

A notice to contractors for construction of the new plant was published in January 1903. ⁽¹¹⁾ The brigantine 'Blakeley' was towed to 'Hastings Mill' in Vancouver harbour where she was loaded with lumber and supplies for building of the company's facilities at 'Barnet'. After being towed to 'Barnet', the 'Blakeley' served as living quarters for the construction employees. ⁽¹²⁾

In March 1903, the 'Western Canadian Fish Company' announced that the 'Blakeley' would embark on its first venture fishing off the west coast of Vancouver Island. ⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾⁽¹⁵⁾ With a crew of 30 men, the 'Blakeley' was anchored in Barclay Sound to act as a fish station. The 'Blakeley' had seven dories on-board, each crewed with two men, that were towed out to the fishing banks each morning by the steamer 'Cascade'. The 'Cascade' also transported the fish caught by the dories back to the 'Blakeley' and again towed the dories back at night. The 'Blakeley' was equipped with baths and salting tables, and the fish caught were salted on-board by ten experienced packers. At the end of the voyage, the catch was delivered to the Barnet plant and dried using the Whitman process. ⁽¹⁵⁾⁽¹⁶⁾



Brigantine 'Blakeley', c.1907

(Source: San Diego History Center, photograph bb18100337_2)

In May 1903, the 'Blakeley' made her first trip to the cod banks of the Bering Sea where she fished during the summer and returned to Vancouver that September. ⁽¹⁷⁾⁽¹⁸⁾⁽¹⁹⁾

In June 1903, it was reported that H.C.H. Cannon was president of the company, E.W. McLean was vice-president, and D.E. Mowat was secretary; and the same newspaper article described a tour of the 'Barnet' facilities conducted by the company directors and managers: ⁽²⁰⁾



Source: 'Pacific Fisherman' magazine, Volume 3, 1905 Annual Yearbook, page 61.

Western Canadian Fish Company – view looking south.

“The main building is a three-storey structure 60 x 60 [feet]. Beginning at the basement which opens directly to the wharf, there is found the storing, cleaning and washing rooms. From this an elevator runs to the third storey where the driers are located. There are two tiers of driers. These driers are like sets of closets fitted with trays. Through them run pipes heated by hot water. The bottoms of the trays are of wide-mesh netting. At the end of the corridor is a huge fan wheel which is kept continually running and which keeps a current of fresh air continually passing through the driers. The works are fitted to turn-out 10 tons of fish a day. The drying process takes 24 hours and after that the fish are kept a short time and if they sweat any, are dried again. After that they will keep indefinitely anywhere from the tropics to the south pole. From the drying floor, the dried fish pass down to the second storey where they are prepared and packed for shipment.”

– **Vancouver Daily World, 19 June 1903.**

In August 1903, the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ purchased the three-masted sealing schooner ‘Eva Maria’ of Victoria to be used in conjunction with the brigantine ‘Blakeley’ for fishing operations. ⁽²¹⁾ The ‘Eva Maria’ delivered her first cargo of fish that October. ⁽²²⁾

In April 1904, the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ reported large orders for their dried fish products at the same time that the brigantine ‘Blakeley’ was dispatched on her second cod-fishing voyage to the Bering Sea. ⁽²³⁾

In September 1904, the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ embarked on a new venture when the company chartered the steamer ‘Queen of the Pacific’ with a crew of 18 fishermen to fish for halibut in the Hecate Strait and Dixon Entrance. The capacity of the vessel was 100,000 lbs. (45,360 Kg) of flitched halibut (sliced parallel to the backbone). ⁽²⁴⁾ However, the halibut fishing was reported as being poor. ⁽²⁵⁾

In January 1905, the ‘Pacific Fisherman’ magazine reported that the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ was doing very well: ⁽²⁶⁾⁽²⁷⁾

“So satisfactory has the experience been that the directors of the company have secured the approval of the shareholders to a plan for the enlargement of the capital of the company with a view to vastly extending the scope of its operations in handling the fish of British Columbia waters. The proposal to engage in the fresh fish trade as well, the general manager and directors feeling that such a course can be adopted with great advantage and economy. To do this and at the same time extend the business of salting, smoking and curing of fish for the rapidly growing market, the company’s officers are building-up, it is imperative that more money be secured for working capital... The only investment necessary will be in increasing the fishing fleet, either by purchasing, or by building vessels especially for the work. For this and for working capital to enable the company to enter successfully in the fields it is proposed, will require a large sum, but the management is confident that the capital will be subscribed.” – **Pacific Fisherman, 1905.**

In April 1905, the brigantine ‘Blakeley’ again embarked on a four-month cruise to the Bering Sea to fish for cod. ⁽²⁸⁾ The ‘Blakeley’ returned that September with a catch of 400,000 lbs. of cod (181,437 Kg). ⁽²⁹⁾

In May 1905, however, it became apparent that the company was having financial difficulties when a meeting of the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ shareholders was held for the purpose of turning over its assets to the newly formed ‘Western Fish Company’. The capital of the new company was placed at \$30,000 (about \$700,000 today). ⁽³⁰⁾

In July 1905, the company assets and business were offered for sale as a going concern, ⁽³¹⁾ and by November 1905 it was reported that the company had been closed-down due to mismanagement. ⁽³²⁾ It should also be noted that there were numerous newspaper articles that same month reporting that halibut stocks were being endangered and depleted. ⁽³³⁾⁽³⁴⁾⁽³⁵⁾

In October 1908, it was reported that the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ sold 30 ac. (12 ha) of District Lot 212 on the shore of Burrard Inlet to the ‘Nichols Chemical Company’. ⁽³⁶⁾⁽³⁷⁾

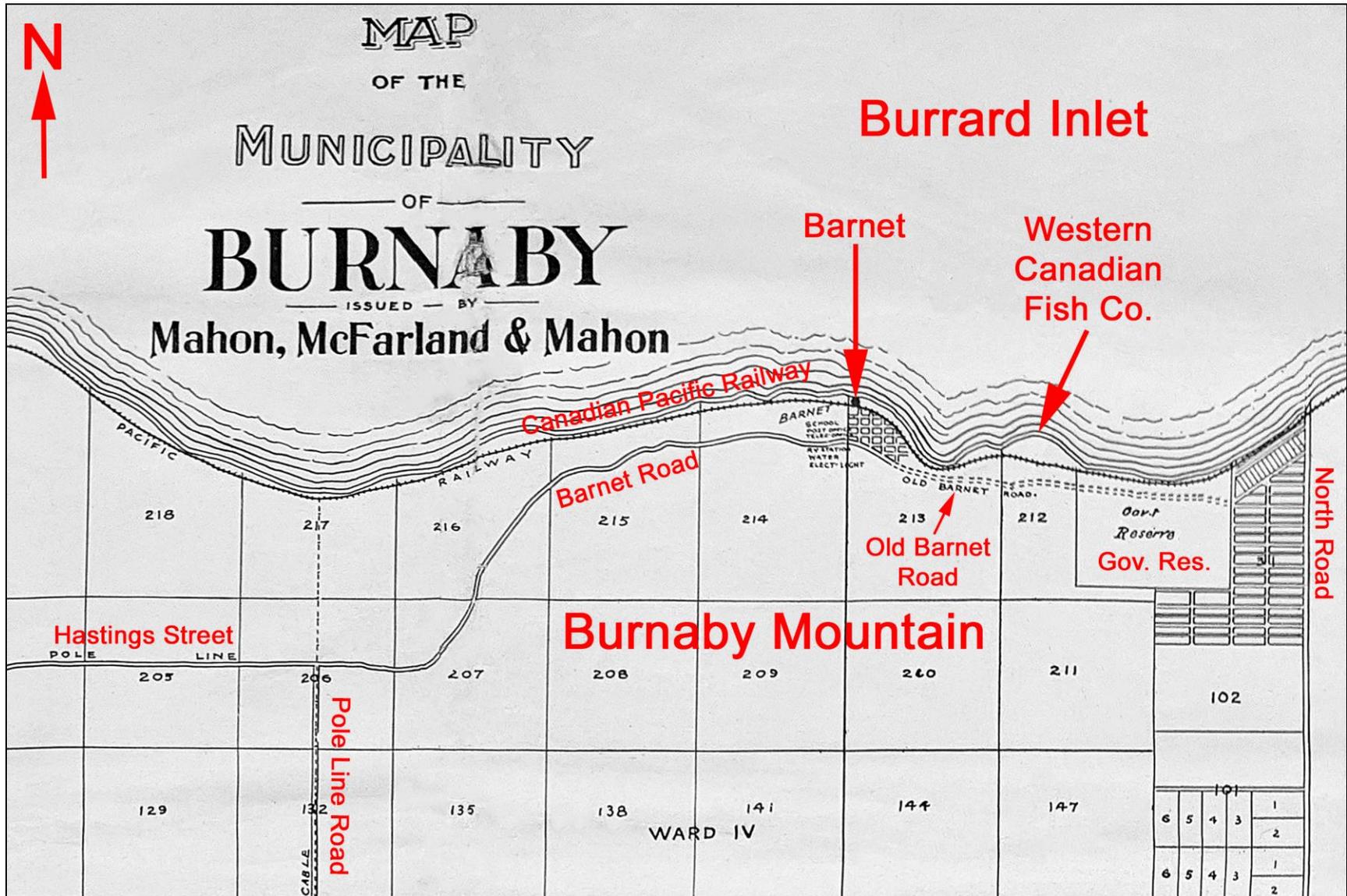
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- (13) "Fishing To Be Commenced", [Vancouver Province, Thursday, February 26th, 1903, p.7.](#)
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- (16) "Preserved Fish", [Vancouver Daily World, Wednesday, May 11th, 1904, page 31.](#)
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- (18) "Cruise of the 'Blakeley'", [Vancouver Province, Thursday, May 7th, 1903, page 11.](#)
- (19) "'Blakeley' is Home", [Vancouver Province, Tuesday, September 15th, 1903, page 11.](#)
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About the Author:

[Ralph Drew](#) is a local historian and self-publishing author who lives in the Tri-Cities community of Belcarra. In 2014, Ralph was awarded first prize in the [B.C. Historical Federation](#) annual book competition, receiving the [Lieutenant-Governor's Gold Medal](#) for historical writing for his self-published history, [Forest & Fjord: The History of Belcarra](#). In 2016, Ralph was awarded second prize in the [B.C. Historical Federation](#) annual book competition for his book titled: [Ferries & Fjord: The History of Indian Arm](#). In 2017, Ralph published his third book titled: [Townsite Tales: The History of loco](#). Ralph's fourth and most recent book was published in October 2018, titled: [Coquitlam Chronicles: Historical Crossroads on the Fraser River](#).



Source: Burnaby Village Museum (BVM HV976_158_6, CBA 1976_0158_0006_002).

Map annotated by Ralph Drew.

Northeast portion of a 1909 map of Burnaby showing area adjacent to Burrard Inlet
 — note the location of the ‘Western Canadian Fish Company’ on District Lot 212
 — also note the location of the “Old Barnet Road” that was built prior to 1903. (38)



Source: City of Vancouver Archives (CVA SGN 1714).

**Wooden B.C.E.R. power poles along the 'Barnet Wagon Road', June 1903
— note the tents (worker's camp) at the end of the road (center) —
also note that there are two lines of poles on opposite sides of the road
and that the electrical lines have yet to be strung on the poles.**



Source: *City of Vancouver Archives (CVA SGN 1711).*

**Wooden B.C.E.R. power poles along the ‘Barnet Wagon Road’, June 1903 —
Since there is only one row of power poles in this photo, it is most likely that this section of
road was located west of ‘Pole Line Road’ (later, ‘Sperling Avenue’) — view looking east.**

The Western Canadian Fish Co., Ltd.

Source: *Pacific Fisherman*, Vol. 3, 1905 Annual Yearbook, pages 60-63,
[University of Washington Library, Digital Collections](#)

Into a practically unexploited field of Industry, the *Western Canadian Fish Co., Ltd.*, of Vancouver, has ventured during the past two years, and the result has been a very gratifying success. The idea of establishing a plant and business for the catching, curing and marketing, of the several varieties of superb deep-sea fish which are to be caught on the northern coast of British Columbia and in the Bering Sea has been carried-out by the company which was formed for that particular business. And this too, where there was no record by which the promoters might gauge their chances of succeeding. That the operations of the company have been rewarded with success is not only due the fact that a correct judgement of the field was formed in advance, but as much to the fact that excellent business methods have prevailed in carrying on the operations of the company.

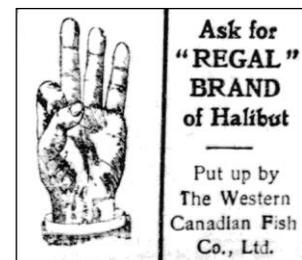


Source: University of Washington Library, Digital Collections, Item: FMB_44264.

Western Canadian Fish Company, Barnet, B.C., circa 1905.

A splendidly equipped plant, adapted to the Whitman process of drying fish, has been erected by the company on property purchased by them at Barnet, a few miles east along the waterfront from Vancouver docks. The property consists of 75 acres and not only has its deep-sea frontage, on which side a wharf has been built, but it is also on the line of the *Canadian Pacific Railway*. The fish caught in far Bering Sea, or in Queen Charlotte Sound, or elsewhere on the coast, are brought direct in the company's vessel to their wharf, whence after being turned into commercial product in the company's fish curing plant, are shipped by rail direct therefrom to the vast and increasing market two thousand miles or more to the east.

The buildings and plant of the company are all new, and especially erected for the business. A large three-story building comprising warehouse to receive fish from the vessels, contains the equipment for drying and packing of the fish for market. The Whitman process for curing is owned by exclusively in this province by the *Western Canadian Fish Co., Ltd.*, and splendid results have been secured from its use. It is especially worthy of notice that this new Canadian Company has to its credit the first practical results in placing cured halibut on the market. By using the Whitman process, cured and smoked halibut in various forms, from dainty cutlets in cartons of one pound, to large fletches, is now supplied to the trade in large quantities, and its increased popularity is a test of its quality.



Newspaper Advertisement

Codfish are also handled in a thorough manner by this company. They own a large schooner which makes annual trips to the Bering Sea, returning after three- or four-months cruise with 200 to 250 tons of green-salted codfish. This vessel, the 'Blakeley', has already made two trips since the company has entered active business. The codfish are cleaned and salted in the hold immediately on being caught, and when the vessel reaches port, its cargo is warehoused at Barnet, where every fish is thoroughly washed and again salted-down to await the curing process, whether for being put-up in dry form or in bricks of one or two pounds. The latter is a favourite in the trade in the Canadian Northwest and the province.



Western Canadian Fish Company – view looking south.

This season, the company has gone extensively into curing salmon as well as halibut and codfish. A large smoking business is done by which all varieties of fish are put-up. Large smoke-houses have recently been added to the equipment of the plant at Barnet.

The marketing of the output of the *Western Canadian Fish Company*, a very important consideration, has been attended with gratifying success, especially when it is remembered that the company was venturing in an untried field. Of course, Canada is the market to be secured for the fish of British Columbia, but other fields may be open after the company has exploited the home market and built-up a demand for its goods. Hitherto, the plan adopted has been to secure orders near to home, and then gradually extend the operation, until today the cured fish put-up by the *Western Canadian Fish Company* are sold in Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, and all the chief cities of eastern Canada. As time goes on, the territory is being more thoroughly covered, wherever introduced, the products of the company have given satisfaction, and secured repeat orders.

So satisfactory has the experience been that the directors of the company have secured the approval of the shareholders to a plan for the enlargement of the capital of the company with a view to vastly extending the scope of its operations in handling the fish of British Columbia waters. The proposal to engage in the fresh fish trade as well, the general manager and directors feeling that such a course can be adopted with great advantage and economy. To do this and at the same time extend the business of salting, smoking and curing of fish for the rapidly growing market, the company's officers are building-up, it is imperative that more money be secured for working capital. There is no present need to extend the existing plant, and no such extension is contemplated, as the buildings at present at Barnet are capable of accommodating much larger trade. The only investment necessary will be in increasing the

fishing fleet, either by purchasing, or by building vessels especially for the work. For this and for working capital to enable the company to enter successfully in the fields it is proposed, will require a large sum, but the management is confident that the capital will be subscribed. At present, though the capital stock has been increased from \$100,000 to \$500,000, only 300,000 shares at par value of \$1.00 each are being offered for public subscription, the balance of the increase, 100,000 shares, being left in the treasury.



Loading processed fish into rail cars (right) – view looking north.

Though connected to the *Western Canadian Fish Company* from its start, General Manager Wm. Erichsen did not take active charge of the company's affairs until a little over one year ago. Since then, the record has been the growing of the markets secured for the products of the concern. The handling of the raw product, the securing it from the seas, the caring for it and curing processes, all have been under his general supervision, and he has been ably assisted by Mr. J.O.W. Brown, Superintendent at the works.

But to Mr. Erichsen's mind, the financing of such a concern, the handling of the product commercially and with due economy, are much greater difficulties than the practical side of the business. In this too he has been eminently successful. From the start, he has kept a watchful eye over the cost of the raw material, and effected great savings there.

In the marketing as a commercial product, the fish from his company's establishment, Mr. Erichsen has shown enterprise and the policy mapped-out by him the day he assumed control of the company has been carried-out with great success. A representative of the *Western Canadian Fish Company* is constantly on the road, in the Canadian Northwest and in Eastern Canada, introducing the goods, securing the orders and each month he has extended his field. Starting with the local market of British Columbia, after Mr. Erichsen took charge, the next field was that of Alberta, and the other territories, gradually extending to Winnipeg, from whence the rest of Manitoba is being reached. During this year, Eastern Canada has been entered, and Mr. Erichsen receives encouraging reports from the company's representative, Mr. D. Mowat, who is also secretary of the company.



Wm. Erichsen

Mr. Erichsen is a master of the fish business, in its practical economic side, and commercially and financially. He has been engaged in it all his life, a large part of the time being sole head of a big wholesale and export concern which shipped all sorts of fresh and cured fish to England.

Mr. Erichsen comes of fish-trade stock. Born in Denmark, he early in life removed to Norway, and his father and grandfather before him were fish merchants in extensive trade and though the two older generations have passed away, there are still some of the family in the business in the old land.

Though he accomplished much in his long experience in building-up a business, Mr. Erichsen began in a small way, and his success was due entirely to his thorough knowledge of the trade, and its conditions, and to his energetic management. When he retired to come to this country, he had his own fishing vessels bringing their catches from all the fishing banks in the waters of the northern sea, and his wholesale connection to England was equally extensive. This is the first venture he has engaged in, in the fish trade in Canada.

Associated with Mr. Erichsen on the board of directors of the Western Canadian Fish Company, are some well-known and substantial business men of Vancouver. Mr. H. C. H. Cannon is president, and the other are W. E. MacLean, John Boyd, J. E. Miller, Robt. Dowswell and Wm. S. Cook.